THE
WITCH'S
FAMILIARS
HAREM OF BABYLON BOOK ONE
G.A. RAEL

# THE WITCH'S FAMILIARS: A REVERSE HAREM FANTASY

HAREM OF BABYLON #1

G.A. RAEL

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# ALSO BY G.A. RAEL

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The Nocturne Agency

Twice Bitten

Blood and Water

---

**The Harem of Babylon Series (Reverse Harem)**

The Witch's Familiars

The Rise of Babylon (Coming June 2018)

The Fall (Coming July 2018)

# ONE

*THIS WON'T BE like last time*, thought Jordan. She ran a hand through her long brown hair to make sure that it wasn't too tousled as the mayor's wife passed with a woman she didn't recognize. The newly middle-aged women were sharply dressed in the requisite small town New England uniform of nautical stripes and sweater sets, but their eyes were even sharper. The mayor's wife spotted Jordan and waved from across the brick lane.

Jordan waved back and hoped her nerves didn't show as she approached the two women. "Hello again, Cindy. I've been meaning to send you a thank-you note for the fruit basket."

Cindy waved a manicured hand to dismiss her apology. "You've barely been settled in a week. Save yourself the trip to the post office." She leaned in and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper as she added, "The clerk is a bit of a jerk anyway."

That caused the woman next to her to cackle and Cindy soon followed suit. Jordan gave a nervous laugh in return and fixed her gaze on the other woman. "I'm sorry; I don't believe we've met."

"I doubt it. I've never set foot in Texas," the woman replied, extending her hand. "I'm Tina, Cindy's far more attractive little sister, as I'm sure you can tell. You must be Jordan Adams."

Cindy rolled her eyes. "She's only two years younger."

"It's nice to meet you, Tina," Jordan said with a wary smile. She was pretty sure Tina was joking but didn't want to respond just in case. Henry Danbridge might hold the highest office in town, but his wife was the one who really called the shots in Cold Creek, Connecticut. Her approval was a

necessity if Jordan was going to pull off the fresh start she so desperately needed. "I'm sorry, you said something about Texas?"

Tina gave Cindy a quizzical look. "Didn't you say that's where she was from?"

Cindy turned the look back on Jordan. "That is what you told me, isn't it, dear?"

"Oh," Jordan said, her breath catching in her throat. Her face grew hot and her pulse quickened in her ears. "Yes, I'm sorry, I did say that. And I am," she added quickly. "My family moved a lot, so I'm originally from Texas, but I just moved from Arkansas."

"Oh, was your father in the military?" asked Tina.

Jordan tried to swallow, but the knot in her throat just wouldn't budge. "No, nothing quite that heroic. He's a traveling minister."

"Well, we all have our lot in life," said Cindy, giving Jordan a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "Jordan here is quite an accomplished--I'm sorry, dear, what exactly is it that you said you do?"

"I'm sort of an amateur horticulturist," she replied. The rehearsed answer flew out of her mouth almost too easily. It was a good cover since no one really seemed to know what it meant and it explained how she was able to afford an apartment without working a regular job.

"How posh," said Tina. "What exactly does that mean?"

Cindy rolled her eyes. "It means she grows plants."

"Pretty much," said Jordan. "I specialize in some of the rarer ones and sell the seedlings to nurseries and enthusiasts."

"How interesting. Well, you'll have to tell Henry all about it when you come over for dinner this Friday," said Cindy. "He's always going on nature hikes. Sometimes I swear the man bleeds green."

"Oh, I couldn't impose--"

Cindy raised her hand with all the silencing authority of a queen. "Now, it's no imposition at all. I've invited a few people from around town and I'm sure they're all dying to meet you. It's not every day our sleepy little town gets a newcomer, and such a young one at that."

"What my sister means is that there's a shortage of single women in our town and she's planning to throw you to the bachelors like a scrap of meat to a den of lions," Tina said dryly. "Fortunately, her poor taste in men extends only to my brother-in-law."

"Oh, stop it. Just because you're a bitter old spinster doesn't mean that young love shouldn't have a chance to blossom. You are single, aren't you, Jordan?" Cindy asked hopefully.

Jordan tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and shifted her paper-wrapped parcel onto her other hip. "I am," she admitted. "But I can't say I'm really looking for a relationship at the moment."

"They never are," Cindy said with a wink. "This town does have its share of eligible bachelors, you know."

"You mean Darren St. Clair," said Tina.

"He's among them, yes," Cindy replied curtly.

Jordan had no sooner opened her mouth to reply than Cindy let out a cry of alarm. "Oh, I almost forgot--I promised my nephew I'd make his commendation ceremony tonight. He’s in the National Guard and those people are nothing if not punctual."

"I'm sure we've kept her long enough anyway," said Tina. "It was nice to meet you, Jordan."

"The pleasure was all mine," Jordan said, managing a more relaxed smile.

"My, so polite for a--" Cindy broke off, tilting her head. "How old are you, dear?"

"Twenty-four."

Both women exchanged astonished glances.

Jordan laughed stiffly. "I hear I look young for my age."

"You certainly do," Tina said with a click of her tongue.

"It would take the full force of the pharmaceutical industry to turn back the clock for this one," Cindy remarked in an oddly affectionate tone. Tina gave her a playful push and the two started down the path.

"See you Friday," Cindy called. "Seven o'clock at the big house on the hill. You can't miss it."

“Yeah, see you then," Jordan said, letting out a sigh of resignation once they had rounded the corner. She resumed the path toward her home but chose to cut through an alley behind the bank at the last moment in hopes of avoiding any other social interactions. Small-town living was a bit claustrophobic, but it beat the chaos of the city.

Cold Creek was it. This time, she was going to make it work. She had to.

The thing Jordan liked most about the little town was how safe it felt. There was a lack of privacy that came with everybody knowing everyone, but there were benefits, too. The alley was wide and well-lit and the occasional flower pot hung from posts behind stores that had probably been in the town longer than most of its residents. It was a good shortcut and she had already stayed out well past dusk. The sooner she got home, the sooner she could treat her balcony nursery to the organic plant food tucked away in her parcel. Jordan might have still been living out of boxes, but her plants had been nicely settled in since her first day in town.

Jordan was momentarily drawn out of her planning by the sight of a white lump in the grass up ahead. She squinted through the thick black glasses that evidently weren't doing as much to help her look her age as she had hoped, but she still couldn't make out what it was. Perhaps it was a wadded up T-shirt, she reasoned, but it would be the first piece of litter she had seen on the clean streets of the pastoral town. As she drew closer, the lump looked more and more like a child's stuffed animal.

Except stuffed animals didn't breathe.

The parcel fell from her hands and dirt exploded onto the pristine brick walkway. Jordan's flat shoes nearly slipped off her feet as she made a dash for the creature. When she got a little closer, she could see that it was a cat whose brilliant white fur was matted with blood all along one side. The cat’s eyes fluttered erratically, flashing the most brilliant hue of green she had ever seen. Its breath, coming in puffs of fog that were barely visible from a distance, had already slowed dramatically.

"Oh, no," Jordan breathed, sinking to her knees as she removed her jacket. She draped it around the injured animal's body to shield him from the nip in the air as the night settled in. "I'm so sorry, kitty."

The cat's eyes focused at the sound of her voice before they rolled back in its head. The eye contact had lasted only for an instant, and yet the plea for help was clear.

*You can help him*, began the needling voice in her mind.

She cringed. "I can't," she whispered apologetically, stroking the soft fur on the cat's cheek. "I'm sorry, I wish I could do something."

The cat shuddered violently.

Jordan's hands began to tremble. "You have to understand, kitty, I promised myself it would be different this time. This is my last chance to be normal."

*It is different. This time you can do something. You can save him--unlike them.*

"Stop it!" Jordan cried when the voice became too much to bear. She lifted the dying animal into her arms and ran back the way she had come. She had passed the animal clinic on her way from the nursery. It wasn't far.

Maybe he would make it...

Jordan's legs carried her faster than she had thought they were capable of, but every second still seemed to drag on. By the time she made it into the town square, the clock above the administration building was chiming nine o'clock. The office would undoubtedly be closed, just like everything else in town, but she could only hope the vet lived above his office like so many of the other business owners in town did.

Just as she had feared, the lights inside the little clinic were all off. Jordan shifted the bundle that was gradually losing warmth to one arm and took a deep breath before pounding on the glass door just above the sign that read Cold Creek Veterinary Clinic. It might not have been a real doctor's office, but it was closer than she would have liked to get to one.

After a minute of frantic pounding, she began to accept that whoever lived above the clinic either wasn't home or wasn't answering. Then the upstairs lights came on and a weary and slightly agitated man appeared at the door a few moments later. His handsome face and almost-black hair put him in his early-to-mid thirties, but the weary lines worn into the corners of his eyes challenged that estimate. He was wearing a T-shirt and flannel pants, which confirmed her suspicions about him living upstairs.

"Are you the vet?"

"I am," he said, glancing at the bundle in Jordan's arms. A growing red stain had soaked through her light jacket. As soon as he saw the cat, the irritation in the vet's voice softened to concern. "Come on inside," he said, pushing the door open.

Jordan wasted no time accepting the invitation and held the cat close to her chest as she rushed into the small yet surprisingly up-to-date office. A couple of exam rooms sat behind a modest reception desk, waiting room and floor scale. Jordan followed the veterinarian into one of the rooms as he slid a tray of tools over to the exam table.

"Put him on the table."

Jordan obeyed, transferring the cat to the slippery metal as gently as she could. He was still breathing, to her relief. She had been fearful that the trip

to the clinic would do him in.

"I'm sorry, I know it's late," she began, "but I didn't know what else to do."

"Is he your cat?" asked the vet, pulling on a pair of blue latex gloves.

"No, I found him in the alley behind the butcher shop. He was attacked by something. A dog, I think."

The man's brow furrowed in consideration as he ran a handheld scanner along the cat's scruff and back. "No chip, and he's not neutered. Got some sharp claws on him, too. Probably a stray, everyone collars their cats here. Maybe he had a run-in with a coyote."

Jordan cared more about the outcome than the cause. "Can you save him?"

The vet's frown took on a sharper angle. "He's lost a lot of blood and no telling what kind of disease the thing that bit him had. Even if he does pull through the night, I'd have to quarantine him for rabies, and that's a huge if."

"There must be something you can do," she protested. "You're a veterinarian, you help animals."

"Look, I'm the first person to give an animal a chance if I can, but in this case treating him would do more harm than good. There's hardly a chance for him even with highly invasive surgery, and he's only going to spend his last few moments suffering."

She gulped. "Fine, then just give him something for the pain and I'll take him home."

He paused. "What's your name?"

"Jordan," she replied impatiently.

"Jordan what?"

After a reluctant pause, she added, "Jordan Adams."

"Alright, Ms. Adams. You did a good thing bringing him to me, but I'm a professional and this is what I do. I'm telling you, this animal can't be saved and I sure as hell can't release him to your care."

"I don't want him to die in a cold office."

"You've done all you can do. The most merciful thing anyone can do for him now is to let him go. I promise you that I'll do everything I can to make it easy."

Jordan nodded slowly, deciding that she wasn't going to get any further by arguing. A new plan was beginning to form in her head. "Alright," she

said, taking a shaky breath. "That's fine, but would you at least let me say goodbye? He deserves to enjoy a few minutes of attention and affection before he's killed."

The vet narrowed his eyes and looked between Jordan and the cat. He finally muttered something unintelligible and likely profane under his breath as he removed his bloodied gloves and deposited them in the biohazard container at his feet. "You have a few minutes while I get the injection ready, and I expect you to see Dr. Danbridge first thing tomorrow morning about that scratch on your wrist. I'll be checking in with her. There's no telling what this cat has."

"I will," Jordan said tersely. The Danbridges were all over town, it seemed.

The vet turned to leave but paused at the door for a moment, as if about to say something. He evidently decided against it, shook his head and left the room.

Jordan wasted no time wondering what he had come so close to saying. She was fairly certain that what she was about to do was a crime, but she waited until the vet disappeared into the back room before gathering the cat into her arms and making her way out the door anyway. She closed the door carefully to avoid triggering the bell that hung above it.

Once she was outside, Jordan held the cat close to her chest to shield it from the crisp autumn air as well as she could. She tried to be swift without jarring the frail thing in her arms, but she knew that if the vet caught up to them, the white cat faced certain doom.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she panted, half to the cat and half to herself. With each passing step, she grew a little more certain that the vet wasn't following them. That or he had already called the police. Surely this wasn't the type of cat burglary that could be prosecuted. Then again, it was a small town and the police probably had time, assuming they weren't all asleep.

So much for getting off to a good start in her new home. She told herself that one little setback couldn't possibly make that big of a difference and she almost believed it.

After what seemed like an eternity, the little two-story building that housed Jordan's apartment came into view. Breathless, she climbed the fire escape to avoid the risk of running into the elderly landlady who lived downstairs. Mrs. Herrin already seemed to have her suspicions about the

various plants and charms hanging on the porch. Jordan could only imagine what the old woman's imagination would do with the sight of her carrying a bloody animal into her apartment.

Jordan's hands were trembling so badly that it took her three tries to unlock her patio door. She immediately cleared the coffee table and placed the fading creature in the center of it before gathering her supplies. They were vastly different from the sterile tools the vet used, but the idea was the same.

A little garlic for vitality. A bit of cat's claw for obvious reasons. A few roots with names that had long since been forgotten for the real magic and some lavender for an extra healing kick. The moon wasn't full, but it was waxing. That would have to be enough. She removed the small blade from a box beneath the coffee table and drew it along the lifeline that ran across her left palm, sprinkling a few droplets of blood into the mortar and pestle that contained the rest of the ingredients. It was a special occasion, after all. A true emergency required a spell with all the trimmings.

She was breaking all the rules anyway.

# TWO

JORDAN FELL ASLEEP CRADLING the cat against her chest. Once she had applied the salve and cleaned his fur, the best she could do was move him to the warm sanctuary of her bed and hope for the best. She had intended to stay up all night, but the events of the day weighed her eyelids down and when they opened, sunlight was streaming in through the billowing white curtain in her studio apartment window.

Strange. She never left the window open.

Looking down, she noticed that the warm bundle in her arms was gone. The only trace left of the cat was the clean white towel she had wrapped him in the night before, now stained burnt orange with dried blood. Her heart fluttered as she stepped onto the cool hardwood floor and looked around the studio, both anxious to find him and fearful of discovering his body.

The salve was strong, but Jordan didn't think it was strong enough for him to get far in his condition. She remembered something her mother had said once about wounded animals slinking off to die alone and felt worry coiling in the pit of her stomach.

Taking a deep breath, Jordan slid open the closet she had yet to fill with her clothes. It was still empty. It was a relief in one sense, but it led to even more confusion. There weren't many other places for a cat to hide in the barren apartment.

A thorough search left her satisfied that he wasn't in the apartment at all, but that only raised more questions. He must have gone out through the open window, which was a good sign for his vitality, but where?

Jordan quickly threw on a jacket and rushed downstairs, nearly colliding with Mrs. Herrin who was dusting the bannister.

"Why the rush?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Herrin," Jordan said, casting a surreptitious glance over her landlady's shoulder. "Hey, um, you haven't seen a cat around, have you?"

"A cat?" Mrs. Herrin asked, planting her dust rag on her hip. "No, and I'd just as soon not. No pets allowed, remember?"

"Of course," said Jordan. "No pets here. I just saw a stray yesterday and I was worried about him."

"Not that I've seen," the landlady said, eying Jordan suspiciously. "Well, go on, no sense in being even later than you already are."

"Right, thanks," said Jordan, making her exit. "Have a good morning!"

The woman gave a vague grunt of acknowledgment as Jordan passed through the door. Mrs. Herrin wasn't the warmest soul, but after years of Southern belles who cooed their adoration to your face and spat curses behind your back, Jordan was more than happy to put up with her landlady's aloofness. At least with Mrs. Herrin you knew what you were getting.

Casting a glance behind her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being watched, Jordan circled the little building and searched the flower beds for any sign of the cat. All she found was a frog and some rose bushes in need of some serious TLC. That would have to be a project for another day.

Mrs. Herrin's home was rural enough that there were a hundred places where an injured animal might hide in the edges of the forest that surrounded the town, and Jordan set about searching every last one. She expanded her perimeter beyond what she felt a wounded animal loping off to die would have been able to reach and decided that wherever the strange cat was, he was probably fine. That didn't stop the needling sense of responsibility she felt for him, but it was enough to give herself permission to stop at the little diner in town for a much needed break. A full day of searching had nurtured a powerful thirst and left her hungry enough to tolerate the greasy spoon fare.

The sign inside the packed diner instructed visitors to seat themselves, so Jordan chose one of a few small tables that were open in the back. A few moments later, a statuesque woman in a tight black bun dropped a one-page menu in front of her. A ring of coffee stained the laminate over the specials section.

"Coffee?" the waitress asked, nodding to the overturned mug in front of Jordan.

"Do you have tea?"

The woman lifted an already heavily arched eyebrow and stared in silence that Jordan decided was probably the only answer she was going to get.

"Coffee would be great then, thanks. I'll have the blueberry pancakes and some over easy eggs, too."

"You got it," the waitress said unenthusiastically, flipping her notebook closed before she took off into the kitchen. Ten minutes later, she returned with a plate of food to save Jordan from the awkwardness of being gawked at by everyone else in the room.

Cindy hadn't been kidding about Cold Creek not getting newcomers often. Then again, the isolation had been the town's major draw. There were no major factories, no famous landmarks and no celebrities tucked away in the quaint green hills. Accordingly, there was no reason for her father to seek her out in the tiny, unremarkable town. Hopefully Jordan herself would be as unremarkable to the town's residents before long.

Jordan paid no attention when the bell above the door signaled the entrance of another customer. At least, not until he called her by name.

She looked up sharply and her stomach churned as she saw the vet making a beeline for her, holding a stack of papers. Her fight or flight instincts kicked in, but she sat there frozen like a child who had just been singled out by an angry teacher in front of the class.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the veterinarian demanded, slamming the papers down on the table in front of Jordan. Her coffee sloshed onto the placemat.

Jordan stared at him for a moment, lost until he held up the newspaper in his hand. Her heart sank as she saw the headline of the Oakwood Gazette, the local tabloid from the last town she had run from. "*Local Girl Heals Sick With Modern Day Magic. Miracle Worker Or Charlatan?*"

The veterinarian's face was both triumphant and accusatory as he watched Jordan read. "I thought you were just another bleeding heart whack job until I looked you up."

Jordan's irritation momentarily exceeded her fear and she snatched the paper from his hands. "You had no right--"

"Oh, I had every right to look you up after you stole an injured animal from my office," he snapped.

Everyone was staring again, this time with more than a passing interest in the newcomer. It was probably the most drama the little town had seen in decades, and Jordan was at the center of it.

Perfect.

“I didn’t want him to die there,” she said, her voice trembling almost as badly as her hands. At least she could hide those in the pockets of her skirt.

"I was going to put him out of his misery," the vet replied. "You had no right to put him through that."

“Well, he at least deserved a chance!"

"A chance with what, your magic potions?" he taunted. “What do you do, wander from one small town to another to prey on desperate people and animals?"

"I never took a dime from anyone in Oakwood," said Jordan, her breath growing shallow as she backed away from him. Even the waitress was staring at them, slack-jawed. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Then enlighten me, because the way I see it, you're either one hell of a snake oil salesman or you really believe this hocus pocus bullshit. Either way, the last thing this town needs is someone like you."

Jordan flinched at his words as she fumbled for a bill in her purse. "No change," she mumbled to the waitress, tossing the money on the table with her half-eaten breakfast before making a beeline for the door.

A strong hand gripped Jordan's arm and nearly jerked her off her feet. "We're not finished," the vet growled, every bit as feral in that moment as the animals he treated. "Not until you tell me what you did with the cat."

Jordan pulled her arm away and spun to face him, tears stinging her eyes. "I cleaned his wounds, gave him one of my 'hocus pocus' salves and when I woke up, he was gone."

“So he crawled off to die alone, then.”

"I looked for his body all day," she replied. "He had to be healthy enough to get out of a second-story window, jump off my balcony and go from there. If you're going to press charges, fine. Otherwise, just leave me alone," Jordan said, finally managing to wrest her arm from his grasp.

The vet stared at her, his brow furrowed. After a long moment of consideration, his shoulders fell and he shook his head. "I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you really are just some true believer who

thought she was doing the right thing. So I won’t press charges. Just remember, I don't do second chances."

"I'm forever in your debt," Jordan snarked, convinced that she would rather have spent the night in a jail cell than deal with the withering stares she was receiving from the other customers in the diner. The narrow path to the door seemed to stretch on forever, but she finally made it outside. She gasped for the breath she'd been holding and the crisp night air stung her lungs as she quickened her pace and headed back to Mrs. Herrin's. The moon loomed overhead and even though Jordan normally felt soothed by its gentle glow, it seemed ominous in the aftermath of such an awkward encounter.

When she finally made it back to the apartment, Mrs. Herrin was still in the downstairs hallway. The stern, judgmental look on her face made Jordan wonder if somehow she knew what had happened at the diner. News traveled fast in a small town, but surely not *that* fast.

"Hi, Mrs. Herrin. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, just fine," she said, pausing for a long moment. "You know, I may be a dreary old widow, but I'm not dead. If you're going to have gentleman callers over, there's no need to sneak around like a teenager."

Jordan stared at her, blinking. "Oh," she said, feeling her cheeks grow warm. The vet must have come looking for her at home before tracking her down at the diner. She decided to at least be grateful that he hadn't told Mrs. Herrin the true reason for his visit. She’d rather her landlady think she had a one-night stand than think that she went from one town to the next scamming people and catnapping dying animals. "It's really not like that, I promise. And it won't happen again."

Mrs. Herrin didn't look convinced, but she went back into her apartment anyway.

"Have a good night," Jordan called, slinking up the stairs.

"I'm sure you will," Mrs. Herrin snorted, disappearing into her home before Jordan could argue.

Jordan groaned, fumbling for her keys. Her hands were still trembling from the ordeal at the diner. Her new start was not off on a good foot.

# THREE

THE APARTMENT WAS EXACTLY as Jordan had left it, but the window was open again. Jordan was sure that she had closed it before leaving to look for the cat. She walked over to close and lock it for good measure before disappearing into the bathroom. A hot shower soothed her aching muscles but did little to wash away the humiliation of her encounter at the diner.

After getting out of the shower, Jordan combed through her long tresses and examined her appearance. She had always been pear shaped, but she'd finally managed to purge her mother's needling criticism of her figure from her thoughts. Most days. Despite being everything both of her parents had tried to keep her from becoming, including voluptuous, Jordan was happy with herself. Years of therapy had convinced her that the more Byron and Marla Hurlow would have disapproved of the woman she'd become, the better off she was.

Jordan wrapped herself in the plush white robe she had unpacked only the morning before. She eyed the pile of boxes waiting on the other side of the studio and decided to hold off a bit longer on unpacking them. After all, the chances of being run out of town by an angry mob were a bit too high to get settled in.

Sleep was a far more enticing option anyway, but when she came out of the bathroom, Jordan discovered that her bed was far from empty. A man with long white hair was casually draped across her bed, completely nude save for the convenient placement of one of her throw pillows. He was so tall that his feet dangled off the edge as he laid propped up on his elbow and toyed with a loose thread on her comforter.

Jordan stood frozen, too shocked to react. When eyes so green they glimmered like jewels locked on her, she knew it was too late. The intruder stood to his full height, his head nearly brushing the ceiling of her converted attic apartment. Even though his hands fell by his sides in a nonthreatening posture, Jordan found herself assessing the likelihood that she could beat him to the door. She was almost glad fear had kept her too paralyzed to scream. The only other person around was Mrs. Herrin, and she didn't want to alert the intruder to the helpless older woman's presence by calling for her.

Without a word, the strange man stepped closer. His silken hair was too perfectly white to be a natural color, yet there wasn't a trace of darkness at his roots. On closer inspection, she was horrified to realize that his eyes weren't just the color of a cat's but the same shape as well. She tried to tell herself they were just theatrical contacts, but they shrunk so realistically as he stepped underneath the light that she began to doubt the only reasonable explanation.

"S-stay back," Jordan stammered, finding her voice once the stranger was too close to dismiss as an illusion.

To her amazement, he halted in his steady approach.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said in a surprisingly gentle voice for someone so imposing. The contrast was so unsettling it made her shiver. His statuesque body and almost feminine facial features reminded her too much of the awful weeping angel statues in her church's graveyard. Jordan had always feared them as a child and now it seemed that one had come to life. The intruder was even beautiful in the same ethereal, almost grotesque way the statues were. "After all," he continued in a melodic voice, "you did save my life."

Jordan stared at him in bewilderment. The words of a madman rarely made sense, she supposed. "I don't even know you."

"Maybe not, but I know you, Jordan--or should I say, Alyssa? I've been watching over you for some time."

She tried to swallow but the coffee had left her mouth dry. "How do you know that name?"

His stone lips curved into a slight smile. "I know everything about you. For instance, I know your father's name is Byron Hurlow and he was once a preacher at the Rockport Redemption Fellowship in Little Rock, Arkansas. I know you've been running for a little over two years now, and I know that

you fear angels more than anything except maybe hurting the ones you love." His cat eyes narrowed and his voice lowered to a knowing tone as he said, "I also know about the fire."

Jordan took a step back only to trip into a stack of boxes behind her. Before she could save herself, the man caught her and rested his hands on her shoulders, keeping a slight distance between them. She marveled at the bizarre display of propriety in the midst of such threatening behavior, but she didn't complain. His skin was surprisingly warm.

"Be careful," he murmured. "You always were a klutz."

He said it so casually, as if they were old friends. "Who are you?" she asked shakily. "How could you possibly know about the --"

"The fire?" he offered. "Like I said, I've been watching you for a very long time."

"Are you an angel?" Jordan asked, pleading internally for the answer to be no.

The tall, white-haired man gave a low chuckle. "Not quite. You may call me Hermes, but who and what I am isn't nearly as important as who you are--and what I can do for you."

"You could start by putting on some clothes, *Hermes*," Jordan said warily. That definitely didn't sound like the name of any angel she'd ever heard of. More like a witch. Or worse, a sorcerer.

Hermes looked down at himself and laughed. It was a surprisingly soft sound. "My apologies. It's been so long since I've been around humans in this form that I forget my manners." He reached for the loose sheet on her bed and tugged it free in one deft motion before wrapping it around his waist. While the modesty was an improvement, it only made him resemble a stone angel all the more. "Better?"

"Much," she said, flustered. "You're really not going to hurt me?"

"Hurt you? I'm here to help you," he replied matter-of-factly. "I can start by helping you get revenge on the man who humiliated you tonight."

She blinked. "You were at the diner?"

"Of course. I wasn't quite as tall as I am now, though, so it's no surprise you didn't see me."

"I don't want revenge," Jordan said, too afraid to ask him to clarify his strange remark.

"Hm, no, that's not really your style," Hermes mused. "Not over something so petty, at least."

Jordan stared at him in uncomfortable silence for a moment. "Earlier, when you said something about 'this form,' what did you mean?"

He smirked. "I could tell you, but I find a visual demonstration often works better. Alleviates some of the, 'But that's impossible!' formalities and lets us cut right to the chase. After all, the full moon doesn't last forever."

His words only caused more confusion, but before she could protest, he was gone. There was no dramatic transformation and not even a puff of smoke. He simply wasn't there anymore and the only trace that he ever had been was the crumpled sheet on the floor.

The sheet began to move and the white cat's head popped out. Familiar green eyes blinked back at Jordan's astonishment and the creature let out a knowing meow as he untangled himself from the sheet and trotted over to rub against her leg. He pawed at her tights and she reluctantly bent to pick him up, taking the opportunity to examine his side.

The cat's white fur was pristine without a trace of blood or the horrible gash from the night before. It was enough to eclipse her shock from the strange man's impossible disappearance. Was he some kind of magician? The cat had to be a part of his act.

Just her luck to end up rescuing a cat who belonged to a complete weirdo.

Her pulse quickened as she held the purring feline. Magic was the only explanation. Jordan had always known there were others like her, those capable of doing fantastical things--or committing blasphemies against nature, depending on your perspective. If there weren't others, her father wouldn't have been able to recognize her for what she was, but meeting another one in person was a different matter entirely.

She searched the apartment in cautious amazement. "Are you still here?"

There was no reply other than the cat's meow as he leaped out of her arms and burrowed under the sheet he had emerged from. A moment later, it rose under the shape of a man and Hermes reappeared before her, keeping his back turned as he refastened the sheet around his waist.

Jordan didn't know whether to clap or to run. "That was incredible. How did you do that?"

When the magician turned around, he was wearing a wide grin. "Oh, that's just one of my parlor tricks. You should see me when I really put on a show."

"That was the cat I saved," she said in disbelief. "I can't believe he's alright, there wasn't even a scratch on him.”

"You should have more faith in yourself," Hermes said with a sly drawl. "You're already very adept at healing and herbs and you could be that good with a lot of things if you tried."

She tilted her head at the cryptic comment. "Where is he, anyway?" she asked, looking around the room.

"You're looking at him," Hermes replied, clearing his throat. "I mean, 'meow.'"

Jordan frowned. "I don't understand."

He chuckled. "I'm the cat, Jordan. It's the only form I can take in this world except on the full moon. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner, but I thought you'd be more receptive to my other form, what with all your hang-ups about magic and men."

Her head began to spin as his words sank in. "You expect me to believe you're some kind of shapeshifter?"

"Some kind," he said in a bemused tone. "And why not? You're a witch, aren’t you?“

"That's different. I just work with things that come from the earth, I use power that's already there," she protested. "And I'm not a *witch*. I dabbled in the occult for a while, but I quit."

Hermes "tsked" in disapproval. "You don't just quit being a witch. You either are or you aren't. It's in your blood, as much as your father hates to admit it. More importantly, it's in your mind. We both know you can do a hell of a lot more than mix some plant clippings together and put them in jars."

She shook her head. "No, not anymore. I opened a door back then, but I'm done with all that now."

"The only door you opened was the one that led to the power that already existed within you," he insisted. "You might be done with the 'occult,' as you put it, but it's far from done with you."

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you think you know about me, but you need to leave," Jordan said, stalking across the room to open the door. She’d had enough of preachers for one lifetime, but she wasn’t any more interested in becoming the pawn of someone who played for the other team.

"You know exactly who I am, Alyssa. I'm the answer to your prayers."

"Stop calling me that."

The doorknob slipped from Jordan's grasp and the door slammed shut. Hermes was smirking when she spun around.

His stage routine was impressive, but it was getting old fast.

"Jordan, then. You can change your name, but you can't change the past," he said pointedly. "Not on your own, but I can help. I can give you the thing you desire most."

"You don't know anything about me, and you have no idea what I *desire*," she said, crossing her arms. "Even if you did, you couldn't give it to me. No one can."

The man's green eyes traveled over Jordan's curves. "I can venture a guess…"

"Unless you want to end up neutered, I suggest you keep your eyes on mine," Jordan warned.

He chuckled. "Strictly business, then. You may *think* that what you want is beyond reach, and you've repressed your gifts for so long that it would take time, but it is possible. How many nights have you laid awake wishing you could undo everything that happened that night?"

"What night?" Jordan demanded.

Hermes gave her a knowing look. "The night your mother and brother went down in flames along with the rest of your father's congregants."

Jordan's eyes narrowed. "If my father sent you —"

Disgust flashed in the magician's eyes. "I would never lower myself to being a faith healer's roadie. Your father and I do go way back, but I assure you, our relationship is as fraught with unpleasantness as yours and his."

Jordan very much doubted that, but the sincerity in the man's voice gave her pause. "If you know about that night, then you know my role in it. Not a day goes by without me wishing I could change it, but…"

"But what?" he challenged. "Put enough intent behind any prayer and you just might get an answer. Is that really so hard to believe?"

Jordan blinked. "So you *are* an angel?"

Something tugged gently at the corner of his lips. "As I said, what I am isn't important. What is important is that what *I* am enables me to give *you* what you want."

"Why?" she asked, leaning against the door. "I'm not saying I believe you, but pretend for a moment that I did. What would *you* get in return for helping little old me?"

Hermes grinned. "Smart girl. Everything comes at a cost. You see, I'm a spirit with certain limitations on the mortal plane. I'm limited to walking the earth in a much weaker vessel, which you're already familiar with, except on the full moon. I can only take this form during the rest of the lunar cycle if I'm bound through contract to a witch, such as yourself."

"Contract?" she asked warily.

"Just a simple little agreement so everyone knows what's expected of them. As much for your benefit as mine, I assure you. Once the contract is signed, I'll become your familiar spirit. I can amplify your power and teach you things in a matter of days that would take even the wisest sage a lifetime to master. Together we'd be damn near unstoppable."

"Something tells me you get more out of this than the simple satisfaction of educating a mind," said Jordan.

"You'd be surprised what motivates a spiritual being," Hermes retorted. "Anyway, we can discuss the exact terms of the contract later. What's important now is that you understand the possibilities of what can happen when you work with someone who wants to help you embrace your gifts rather than repress them."

Jordan looked away. "I told you, I'm not interested in using my 'gifts' anymore."

"The fact that you've lived in seven different towns over the last two years says otherwise," he mused. "You're a bleeding heart. The moment some old lady comes to you with a sob story, you're back to your old ways and slinging miracle cures. And what do they do to reward your compassion? They use you, if they don't run you out of town with pitchforks."

"You're right, nothing good ever comes from using my powers," said Jordan. “That’s all the more reason to stay away from creeps like you who want to use them.”

“Creep?” Hermes clutched his chest dramatically. Once he realized she wasn’t amused, he continued, "It's not your powers that are the issue. It’s your execution and your lack of guidance, which I’m more than happy to provide in exchange for legs that aren’t covered in fur.”

Jordan sighed. "Even if I believed you, what you're talking about just isn't possible.” Her chest tightened as she thought back to the night she fought so hard to suppress. The screams… the smell of burning flesh… “Even a witch can’t raise the dead.”

“A witch, no.” Hermes crossed the room without taking his eyes off of Jordan. He planted one hand on the door behind her and lifted her chin with his slender fingers. They were cool to the touch now. “It would take something much greater than that. United, our power would know no bounds."

It was all Jordan could do to hold contact with that unnatural gaze. She wanted to throw him out on his tight, presumptuous ass, but there was something about the man that was hypnotic. Maybe this was how a serpent felt when it was being charmed, only she wasn’t sure which one of them was the snake. “Don't you think maybe there are some boundaries that shouldn’t be broken?”

Hermes’ easy smile unsettled her more than anything. "I can't say I've subscribed to that philosophy for a very long time." After what seemed like forever, he pulled away. Jordan struggled to hide her sigh of relief as he stepped away from her and walked towards the window. Showing weakness around him seemed as perilous as infatuation. The lock turned slowly and the window lifted on its own.

"I'll give you some time to think it over," he said, glancing back at her. "You have until the autumn equinox to give me an answer. Make sure it's one you can live with, because I'm not big on second chances."

"Wait," she called.

"Yes?" He blinked slowly at her. He really was a cat, even in his human form.

"Why me? There must be other witches you could ask.”

"Of course there are. I've worked with many special humans over years, the last one more than seventy years ago."

"What happened to her?"

"Him," he corrected. "Let's just say there's a war going on in the spiritual realm and war always has its casualties."

Jordan’s eyes widened. "Why did you wait so long to find someone else?"

"I guess I'm just a finicky cat after all." He winked and propped his foot on the windowsill, letting the sheet fall to the floor. "Goodnight, little witch."

Before Jordan could protest the nickname, the magician was gone and the white cat perched on the window for an instant to lick its paw before

taking off down the fire escape. Jordan stared for a long while, struggling to convince herself that it had all just been a bizarre hallucination.

A hallucination that Mrs. Herrin had seen sneaking in through her window.

Maybe it was time to move again after all.

# FOUR

BY THE TIME FRIDAY CAME, Jordan had completely forgotten her invitation to Cindy Danbridge's party--at least until she ran into Tina at the market. As the woman went on about how she was sure her brother-in-law was going to make another comment about her oil-drizzled asparagus being too dry like he had at the last party, Jordan frantically wracked her brain for something to bring. If she hurried, she would have just enough time to get back home, change into something respectable and make it to the party.

If Tina had heard about the debacle at the diner, she didn't bring it up. Jordan had noticed a few stares from the other customers but tried to tell herself she was just being paranoid. Maybe the voracity of small-town gossips really was just a stereotype.

Excusing herself from Tina, Jordan picked up the ingredients for a quick tiramisu and rushed home. At least the promise of social anxiety was distracting her from the unreal events that had transpired a few nights earlier. In fact, her bewilderment was beginning to fade into seething anger over the fact that she had nearly ruined her fresh start to save a cat who wasn't really even a cat and most certainly didn't need saving.

Before Jordan made it out of the town square, a hand grabbed her from behind. She spun around, afraid it was the vet or the cat-man. Instead, it was a young girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen.

"You're the new girl, aren't you? The one who sells magic potions."

*Here we go,* thought Jordan. The girl probably wanted a love potion to use on the highschool quarterback. “I don't sell anything but plants. Everything else is just a rumor.”

"But you healed that white cat," the girl said in a steely tone. "I've seen it around town. The vet said it was all chewed up by a coyote and now it's fine. Not even scarred.”

"It's just a coincidence," Jordan insisted. “It was a different cat. Really, I didn't do anything."

"Stop lying! I know all the cats around here.”

A few passing townsfolk cast them strange glances. The girl looked down and rubbed her arm. "I'm sorry," she said in a lowered tone. "I didn't mean to get upset, it's just that I could really use a healing potion."

Jordan felt a pang of regret and touched the girl's arm. "It's alright. Look, I'm sorry about whatever is going on with you, but if you're sick, you should go see a doctor. Magic isn't real and even if it was--"

"It's not me," the girl replied quickly. "It's my grandfather. He's only sixty-six, but the doctor says he's developing early Alzheimer's and there's nothing we can do except put it off a little while. He's starting to forget things. Just little things for now, but it seems like it gets worse every day."

"I'm so sorry," Jordan began, taking a deep breath. "I really am, but there's nothing I can do."

"That's not true," the girl said, planting the toe of her shoe in the concrete. "I've heard of people like you. I know there's fake shit, but there have to be real witches too. Cures doctors won't try because they can't test them in a lab. My grandfather is dying, nothing's gonna make it worse." Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears. "Please, he's all I have left."

The emotion in the girl's voice wore away at Jordan's resolve. Maybe if she had done nothing about the cat it would have been another story, but she had already broken the rules once.

Jordan glanced around and pulled the girl behind a building, worried they were beginning to attract attention. "Look, I'm not a doctor and I can't give you any kind of cure."

The girl's crestfallen expression gave way to tears.

"*But*," Jordan continued, "sometimes I… make things. They're just little tinctures for my plants and stuff like that, and they’re good in my morning tea. Sometimes I leave them on my balcony on the top floor of the little white house just outside of town. In fact, if I were to forget and leave one out on the porch railing tonight and someone took it while I was gone, I probably wouldn't even notice as long as they never told anyone about it. I mean *anyone*, do you understand?"

The girl nodded, wide-eyed.

"Alright," Jordan said, shifting her grocery bag to her other hand. "I have to get going, uh… What did you say your name was?”

"Jenna," the girl replied eagerly. "Thank you so much."

"I didn't do anything," Jordan said with a stern look, turning to walk back down the path. Her heart was heavy the entire walk home as she wondered if she’d just dug her own grave.

With an hour to spare before the party, Jordan whipped up a tiramisu to bring the hostess and stuck it in the refrigerator to cool before beginning her preparations on the tincture. It was a surprisingly simple mixture and an easy one to charge with energy. Healing was more of a science than an art, but once the basics were mastered, it was easy to produce consistent results. The concoction wouldn't keep the disease at bay forever, but it would slow its progression enough to give Jenna's grandfather the years of lucidity he had expected when entering his retirement years.

Jordan hesitated a moment before carefully placing the tincture in a little box on the balcony. She watered her beloved plants, giving the leaves of her favorite holly an affectionate caress before returning inside to shower and change for the evening. She wanted to make a good first impression on the mayor and the other guests to counteract whatever they may have heard about the incident at the diner. She settled on a dark green dress that hugged her curves in all the right places and a pair of tall leather boots paired with dark tights. A bit of product made her wavy hair manageable. It was hardly a revealing outfit, but a lifetime of religious conditioning made it hard to ignore the voices of condemnation screaming in her head whenever she put on anything less than a turtleneck.

She warred with herself over whether she should wear her glasses before she finally close to leave them on, reasoning that thick frames were still more sophisticated than tripping over things the entire night. Besides, they made her look a little closer to her actual age. After grabbing her clutch on the nightstand, she locked the apartment up to prevent any more unwanted visitors. Only when she was sure her apartment was secure did she drive into town.

The mayor's house wasn't quite a mansion, but it was close. The circular drive was lined with tastefully manicured shrubbery and azaleas adorned the walk that led to the large wooden door of the crisp white New England colonial. Jordan raised her hand to knock just as Cindy opened the door.

"There she is! Welcome, dear, come in. Oh, how sweet, you brought a dish!" She took the dessert from Jordan's hands and kicked the door shut with her heel.

"Thanks for having me," Jordan said, relieved that she wasn't being turned away after her in-town humiliation. Surely Cindy had heard the gossip by then. Jordan handed her purse and jacket to an attendant Cindy had beaten to the door.

"Of course! It's a full house, so you'll get to meet everyone who's anyone in Cold Creek if you haven't already. I'll introduce you to some folks, starting with my husband," Cindy said, coming to a stop in front of a solemn-looking man in a crisp gray suit. Jordan felt instantly underdressed and she berated herself mentally for not wearing something more formal as she took the mayor’s outstretched hand.

"This is my Henry,” Cindy said, her face glowing with pride. “Henry, this is Jordan. She's the newcomer I was telling you about."

"Nice to meet you, Jordan," he said in a baritone voice. Henry Danbridge was the kind of man who looked as if he had been forced into a suit when he would’ve much preferred to be wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. His gray beard and salt-and-pepper hair contrasted sharply with his keen golden-brown eyes.

"It's nice to meet you too, Mayor Danbridge," Jordan said, trying not to wither under the man's pleasant yet intimidating gaze.

"Call me Henry.” It was an order, not an offer.

"Jordan is a Southern girl," Cindy said, giving the younger woman's shoulders a squeeze. "They're all so formal."

"I think you'll find Cold Creek to be a laid-back town," said Henry, clutching a glass of wine. "What brings you to us, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all," said Jordan. "I have a flexible job and I've always liked small towns."

Henry considered her answer for a moment and Jordan could tell he wasn't satisfied, but he took a sip of his drink and nodded. "Well, Cold Creek is definitely small. Enjoy your stay, Jordan. I'm sure my wife will show you around and find you a mate if she doesn't already have one lined up."

Cindy gave his arm a playful swat. "You hush," she said, taking Jordan by the arm to lead her into the crowd. "Now, where has that Darren gotten

off to?"

“Who’s Darren?” Jordan asked warily.

“A very nice man. I think you two would really hit it off.”

Jordan groaned internally. Matchmaking was just about the last thing on her mind, second only to that dental filling she’d been putting off for too long. Besides, she doubted any of Cold Creek’s residents were interested in the kind of baggage she was carrying.

Cindy paused and squinted across the room. "Oh, *no*. They're using the wrong garnish for the pork loin. Grab a drink and I'll find you, dear."

Jordan watched as her hostess stalked the hired caterers like a lioness after gazelles. Relieved to be let off the conversation hook, she went over to the bar and sipped her glass of wine in a relatively low-traffic corner of the room. What Cindy had painted as an intimate gathering had turned out to be a bash that would make Gatsby himself envious. Once she saw the women in cocktail dresses and the men in linen suits fit for a balmy spring night, her fear that she was woefully underdressed was confirmed.

"You must be Jordan Adams," called a warm, chipper voice. Jordan turned to look behind her and saw that the voice belonged to a willowy man who looked like he’d just stepped out of a country club brochure. His golden hair was slightly longer in the front than it was in the back, leading-man style. He wore a well-tailored tan suit with an open jacket and a light blue tie that made his eyes look that much bluer in comparison. He was undeniably handsome, but Jordan couldn't help but feel he had spent a lot of time looking so effortlessly put together.

He extended his hand for a warm if unnecessarily firm handshake. "I'm Chase Wilde. The local ambulance chaser."

"Oh, hi," she said, returning the handshake. Chase certainly looked the part of a lawyer. Hopefully he wasn't introducing himself because he thought she could use legal representation after what had happened at the diner. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Chase said with a plastic grin. "We don't get many newcomers in town."

"So I've heard," Jordan said, taking a sip of wine to calm her nerves. "Cindy didn't mention this was going to be such a formal affair. I'm afraid I'm not really dressed for the occasion."

"Don't be ridiculous, you look stunning," Chase said, giving her an appreciative once-over. As overt as the gesture was, it didn't strike Jordan as

lascivious. Not like Hermes, who oozed sex with every breath. Chase cleared his throat and hesitated a moment before asking, "What brings you to our little slice of nowhere, Ms. Adams?"

"Well, I traveled a lot growing up so I guess I just like changing up the scenery every now and then," she said, taking another long sip of wine. "And please, call me Jordan."

Chase watched her with great intent and she could see the wheels turning in his eyes. "Pardon me if this is too intrusive, but isn't traveling a rather expensive pastime for a person your age?"

"You talk like you're soon for the grave, Mr. Wilde," Jordan said in what she hoped he would take as a teasing tone. "You don't look that much older than me."

"Chase," he insisted. "And I apologize, I didn't mean to pry. It's just strange for a young woman to show up in a rural little town with no notable history to speak of. Cindy said you have a botany business, but we're hardly a thriving market with a population that's barely into the five digits." His smile grew. "Just trying to fit the pieces together."

"Your clients are lucky," she said with a nervous laugh. "You're very inquisitive."

"It's a blessing and a curse."

Jordan sighed. She'd always known it was just a matter of time before someone asked the right questions. Her fresh start in Cold Creek hadn't been nearly as smooth as she had hoped, but the idea of starting over again so soon was too exhausting to bear. If coming out with a bit of the truth was what it would take to keep the lawyer from dredging up the rest, so be it. "I'll be honest with you, Chase, the biggest draw of Cold Creek is the fact that there is no obvious draw."

"I see," he said knowingly, waiting for her to go on.

"A little over a year ago, there was an… accident," she said quietly. "It was too painful to remain in the same town, and the settlement I received allowed me the freedom to start over, so I've been traveling ever since. It just felt like it was time to put down some roots, and Cold Creek seemed as good of a place as any."

"I'm so sorry," he said in what seemed to Jordan to be his first genuine display of the evening. "I really shouldn't have pried."

"No, it's fine. It's a small town, I know people are going to ask questions," she murmured. "At least you're asking directly. That's the main

reason I moved in the first place, I guess. I just got tired of being 'the girl from the fire' and I wanted to go somewhere I wouldn't be recognized. I'm sure you've heard enough about what happened in my last town to know that it didn't go so well."

Chase hesitated. "I work primarily as a defense attorney. I don't believe most of the rumors I hear, never mind the ones I read about."

Jordan smiled. "In this case, they were greatly exaggerated. I'm just another flaky new age amateur botanist who made the mistake of settling down in the Bible Belt. Things got a little out of hand when someone found out I mixed my own plant food and..."

"Say no more," he said, holding up a hand. "I know how the zealous types can be. Fortunately, you'll find the people of Cold Creek to be a bit more tolerant than the small town populous you're used to."

"Everyone except your vet."

Chase gave a derisive snort. "*He's* on the other end of the dogmatic spectrum. Militant atheist."

"Ah," said Jordan. Secretly, she couldn't fault him for that. Sometimes she wished believing in nothing was an option for her.

A server came by holding a tray of margaritas. Her mother’s favorite drink. Jordan and her brother had once gotten the whipping of a lifetime for taking a taste of one of the leftover glasses while their mother was passed out on the couch. The salty rim and bitter liquid alone would’ve been enough of a punishment.

"No thanks," said Jordan, waving her hand slightly as the server thrust the tray toward her. The woman spun around in the same instant and the tray struck Jordan's hand, toppling out of the server’s arms. Jordan watched helplessly as the whole thing went down.

Chase’s hand shot out and at first it looked like he was going to save the tray. Instead, he reached past it and caught only the salt shaker, letting the tray and glasses shatter. It all happened in an instant but it felt like longer.

"Nice job," Chase muttered to himself, rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish look on his face as he became aware of the crowd staring at him. He held up the salt shaker with an air of false triumph. "Good news everyone, the salt is safe."

The crowd laughed, instantly disarmed.

In that moment, he reminded Jordan of a golden retriever--beautiful, charming and unexpectedly goofy--and it was not an association that would

be forgotten any time soon.

"Well, that was embarrassing," he muttered, bending down to clean up the tray as the server hurried off. Jordan knelt and followed suit, surprised that someone like Chase was willing to literally stoop to clean up someone else's mess.

"You're not the one who practically threw the tray," she said dryly, dropping a few large chunks of glass onto the tray. She watched him for a moment as his hair fell over his eyes and he focused intently on plucking shards off the floor.

"I suppose she was slinging the tray around," he agreed, glancing up at Jordan. "Let's hope she's gone off for a broom."

“Yeah—ow!" A shard dug into Jordan's finger and she hissed air in through her teeth as she stared down at the pooling blood on her fingertip.

Chase snapped to attention, his sleek golden strands only partially obscuring the wild look in his once soft blue eyes. "You're hurt." His voice was lower than it had been a minute ago. Polished stone had become gravel.

"I'm fine," she assured him, sucking on the tip of her finger. "See? Just a small cut."

It was certainly nothing compared to what she inflicted on herself to make her potions.

The waitress returned with a broom and dustpan. "I'm so sorry about--oh, you didn't need to do that," she said once she saw that the mess had mostly been cleaned up.

Chase stood, raking a hand through his mildly disheveled hair. "I'm afraid we've had a small accident," he said, taking Jordan's wrist and holding her bleeding hand up as proof. "Where can I find a first-aid kit?"

"The bathroom down that hallway, first door on the left," said the waitress, pointing. "I'm really sorry."

"It's not your fault," Jordan insisted before Chase dragged her off. “Chase, it's fine."

"It's not fine," he all but growled. Jordan staggered at his sudden change in demeanor as he released her hand and motioned her to follow him into the bathroom. He kept his back to her as he rummaged through the medicine cabinet and placed a first-aid kit on the edge of the sink.

By the time he turned around, he was his genial, handsome self again as he offered his hand. "It's the least I can do. You wouldn't have gotten hurt at all if I’d caught that tray."

"That's quite a heavy sense of responsibility you've got there," Jordan said, reluctantly placing her hand in his. The wild look in his eyes returned as he turned her hand over, but it was gone so soon that she thought maybe she had imagined it altogether.

"We take liability seriously in my line of business," Chase said in a tone so grave he could only be joking. He held her finger under running water for a moment before spraying some kind of antiseptic on it from the kit. Jordan flinched out of instinct, but it didn't sting.

"Well, I've had my share of lawsuits for a lifetime."

He gave her an apologetic smile and finished bandaging her finger. "There we are. I'm no MD, but I think that should hold for the evening."

"Thanks," Jordan said, stepping back from the sink. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Are you hemophobic?"

He blinked.

"It means a fear of blood, not --"

"I know what it means," he said with a chuckle. "And no, I'm not. Why do you ask?"

"You just looked a bit freaked out when I got cut," she tried to explain. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

He gave her that disarming smile as he meticulously placed everything back in the kit before returning it to the medicine cabinet. "It's my own personal philosophy that there's no such thing as a question that shouldn't be asked, just acceptable questions and better ones."

"Okay, I'll bite," she said, crossing her arms. "What's the better question?"

He leaned in close, which meant leaning down a considerable distance to match her height. "How about… ‘Are you a vampire?'"

Jordan stared at him for a while, nervous laughter building in her throat. He was certainly elegant enough to be one, not to mention strange enough. Witches were one thing, even if she wasn't eager to adopt the label for herself. They were part of the religious narrative that had been passed down for thousands of years, the same narrative that angels belonged to. Vampires seemed entirely unrelated to the powers and principalities Jordan's father had always warned her about. They were just too idyllic to be real, even if

Chase Wilde did fit the bill. But she’d believe anything after seeing a man turn into a cat.

When his intense gaze caused her skeptical mind to waver ever so slightly, his face split into a wide grin set with very human teeth. In fact, the only thing at all abnormal about them was how white they were. “I’m kidding. I have been told I look kind of like one from some ‘90s movie, but alas, I'm just your typical boring pencil pusher. Nothing wild.”

Relief echoed in Jordan's laugh. "You had me going for a second there. Very clever pun, though."

"Pun?"

His blank look made her realize it had been an accident. "Well, yeah. Your last name is Wilde, so I figured it was another name joke. You know… Chase the ambulance chaser?”

He cringed. "Oh, that's bad."

"Yeah," she agreed, deciding not to admit that it was also a bit endearing.

"Let's get you back to the party," he said, offering his arm. Jordan took it with far less hesitation this time and let him lead her back out into the main hall. The mess had been cleaned up and appetizers were being passed around. The party seemed back in full swing.

"Jordan!" Cindy's voice rose above the chatter in the room. Jordan looked up to see her dragging a man through the crowd. She had been wondering when this mysterious eligible bachelor would show up and was admittedly curious as to what he could possibly have that made him worth mentioning over the debonair if cheesy Chase.

When Cindy and the stranger she was leading like a dog on a leash finally came into view, Jordan's throat closed up. It wasn't a stranger at all. It was the vet.

# FIVE

DARREN LOOKED AS SURPRISED at the encounter as Jordan was, though not nearly as horrified. And why should he be? He wasn't the one who had been humiliated in a room full of strangers.

"I'd like you to meet Dr. Darren St. Clair," Cindy said, looking between them in confusion. "Do you two know each other already?"

"Not by name," Jordan said guardedly, waiting for the vet to launch into another tirade.

"We met briefly the other day," he said, keeping his eyes locked on Jordan.

"Oh, then you'll have something to talk about," Cindy said, looking between them with a conspiratorial shimmer in her eyes. She glanced over her shoulder when Chase cleared his throat. "Oh, and I see you've already met Chase. My, the boy does move fast."

Chase’s pleasant smile remained, but it started to crack a little in one corner. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, Cindy. Jordan has just been graciously keeping me company during this lovely evening you've put together."

"Oh, how nice," Cindy said, bending under the weight of his charm. "It was all so last minute."

"It's lovely," Jordan insisted, glancing at Darren. "In fact, I should probably leave to make sure it stays that way."

"Don't be silly, you just got here," said Cindy, giving Darren a strange look.

"Yes, please stay," Chase added a bit too eagerly.

"If anyone should leave, it's me," said Darren.

"Yes, maybe you should," Chase said in an icy tone.

“Chase!” Cindy cried.

"Go ahead, Darren. Tell Cindy how you cornered Ms. Adams last week at the diner," Chase said, taking a step closer to the vet.

So he did know. Now his interest in her made even less sense.

Cindy looked between the two men, frowning. "What is he talking about, Darren?"

"There was an... incident," the vet said, clearing his throat. "That's actually why I came here tonight. I'd like to speak with Jordan alone, to apologize."

"I'm sure you would," Chase muttered. Just when Jordan thought he was about to deck the veterinarian, Cindy stepped between them.

"That's enough. Chase, it sounds like these two have some unfinished business to discuss, so why don't you and I take a walk?"

"But--"

"Come along, dear," Cindy said in a singsong voice, leading Chase away by the arm. He cast a forlorn glance back at them before they disappeared into the crowd.

"I think that's my cue," Jordan said, turning to search for the attendant who had taken her coat.

Darren grabbed her arm, this time with less force than he had shown at the diner. Still, his touch was unwelcome and she quickly shirked away from it. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't touch me."

"Sorry," he muttered, dropping his hand immediately. "I really did just come in hopes that I’d run into you. I had no idea Cindy was planning on playing matchmaker."

"I'd hope not--unless, of course, you have a thing for publicly humiliating girls before you hit on them."

He stared at her with a blank look, as if he didn't quite know how to respond to that. It gave Jordan time to notice how well he cleaned up, much to her chagrin. "I don't," he replied at length.

"Great, then there's nothing more to discuss. Goodnight, Dr. St. Clair, and please give Cindy my apologies for leaving early. I've suddenly developed a headache," she said, ready to leave without her jacket.

"Jordan, please, I meant what I said about coming to apologize for what happened," he said in a hushed tone. "As long as we're both here --"

"Excuse me?" Jordan called once she spotted the attendant. "Do you know where I can get my jacket?"

The man nodded and disappeared into the other room. Jordan looked away and fidgeted with the clasp on her clutch for something to do while she waited in the foyer.

"Look, I get that I'm not your favorite person right now," Darren began, "but you have to understand how it looked from my perspective."

"Oh, I understand perfectly."

"No, you don't," he said. "I have a responsibility to protect this town--not just the animals, but the people."

"And I'm sure the citizens of Cold Creek are very lucky to have you as their vigilant guardian," Jordan said, purposely avoiding his gaze. "You made it very clear how you felt about me the other day in front of everyone, so there's no need to go over it again."

"You don't get it," he muttered. "The people in this town are vulnerable in ways you as an outsider couldn't possibly understand."

Jordan frowned. "So help me understand."

Darren raked a hand through his tousled hair and Jordan noticed that he was wearing a worn T-shirt beneath his open blazer. Maybe he hadn't completely cleaned up after all. At least she wasn't the only one who hadn't come dressed for the occasion. "I can't. Not here," he said, glancing around as if looking for someone. "Let me buy you some coffee and we can talk about it then."

"I'm kind of soured on coffee lately." She was never going back to that diner again after the scene Darren had caused. To her relief, the attendant slipped through the crowd with her light tan coat. "Thank you," said Jordan.

"Look, I saw the cat," Darren said quickly, evidently aware that he was running out of time. "I don't know how he's okay and I don't believe for a second it's because of your herbal—" he paused as if searching for the right word, "*things*. Still, when I saw him there wasn't a scratch on him, so I figured I should at least hear you out."

"Who says I want to be heard by you?" Jordan challenged, struggling to hold onto her clutch while she slipped her jacket on as she walked toward the front door.

Darren followed her and took her jacket before she could protest, holding it so she could slip her arm through the other sleeve. "Just give me half an hour of your time, that's all I'm asking."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid I have to decline," Jordan said, flipping her hair out of her collar. "Goodnight, Dr. St. Clair."

"That's fine," Darren said in a tone that made it clear he wasn't used to hearing the word “no” once, let alone three times in a row. His hand pressed against the door to hold it shut, but he made it look like he was just casually leaning there. His entire demeanor changed as he stared down at her. “But let me say one more thing before you go. Chase Wilde is not the kind of guy you want to be getting involved with."

Jordan narrowed her eyes. "I don't think I like the idea of a stranger telling me what to do, Dr. St. Clair. Care to back that order up with an explanation?"

He rolled his eyes. "Here's your explanation. The rumors about him make the rumors about *you* look like second grade gossip. I've known Chase my entire life and he definitely has a type. You're it, and where he's concerned, being 'it' is never a good thing."

"You've done enough digging into my past that you should know I don't put much stock in rumors, or the people who spread them," Jordan said coldly, missing the last button on her coat in her haste to get out the door. She sprinted down the steps and almost made it before her shoe caught on the second-to-last one and sent her hurtling forward.

A lean man in a black suit caught her, saving her a face-first meet-and-greet with the pavement. Strong, elegant hands rested on her shoulders to keep her steady. Jordan looked up into a pair of vivid golden eyes framed by messy brown hair. The man was beautiful in the same androgynous sort of way Hermes was, and he cut a dashing silhouette in his dark suit.

"Careful, princess," the stranger said in a husky voice, his eyes dancing with amusement as she gestured toward Jordan's car, which was already parked and running in the circular drive. "Your carriage will wait for you."

Jordan blinked. “I don’t remember giving my keys to the valet.”

"No?" Something about the surprise in his voice didn't seem quite genuine. "The staff has been all over the place tonight. My apologies."

"*You're* staff?" Jordan asked doubtfully, looking the man up and down. “You look a lot like the mayor."

The fake valet laughed, leaning on Jordan's door. "You caught me. Max Danbridge, at your service. I’m Henry’s nephew. I was hoping I could at least fool an outsider."

"You know who I am?"

"Let's see, you're the only person here I'm not related to or whose kids I didn't go to school with. It's a safe bet that you're the troublemaker everyone is talking about," Max said with a lopsided grin. "They left out some important details, though. Namely how cute you are."

Jordan's face grew warm and she wasn't quite sure what to do with the compliment. Before she had the chance to formulate a reply, Max asked, "What were you running from, anyway? My aunts can be a bit chatty, but they're not that bad."

"No, it wasn't them at all," Jordan murmured. "It was Dr. St. Clair."

A look of surprise passed over Max's face and he laughed. "Oh, let me guess. He tried to apologize for being an asshole at the diner and made it worse?"

"How'd you know?"

"I'm the one who told him to apologize," Max said with a wink.

"You're friends?" Jordan asked, unable to hide her surprise. They didn't seem like the types who'd get along.

"Yep. Darren's a complete idiot, but he's a good guy. Just a little rough around the edges."

"You can say that again," Jordan muttered.

The front door opened and a stout woman appeared, shouting, "Max!"

Max cringed. "And that would be my mother. Probably wants me to make another Merlot run," he grumbled. "It was nice to meet you, Jordan. I work at the post office in town, so come see me if you need any help forwarding your mail."

"Thanks, I will," Jordan said, slipping inside her car as Max opened the door. She rolled down the window and the self-appointed valet leaned in.

"Be careful around here, Jordan," Max said, growing serious. "Cold Creek's a pasture of sheep, but it's got its fair share of wolves."

Jordan nodded, too confused by the cryptic comment to reply. Max patted the top of his car and dashed up the stairs. As Jordan pulled out onto the road, the strange man continued to play a heavy role in her thoughts. In all her years in the South, Jordan had never quite met anyone like Max Danbridge.

Or Chase Wilde, for that matter. As enigmatic as Cold Creek and its varied residents were shaping up to be, at least there was one familiar figure among the rest. Darren St. Clair might've been a staunch atheist, but he was just a new variation on the same men she had known her entire life. Loud,

self-righteous and--no matter how much Max or Cindy seemed to like him--not to be trusted for a moment.

# SIX

JORDAN YAWNED and rolled out of bed to turn off the blaring rock music station that served as her alarm. Def Leppard wasn't her favorite, but it certainly woke her up.

When she saw the blinking message light, her heart skipped. Cindy. The party had been more than a week ago and Cindy hadn't returned any of her calls. Jordan had taken her silence as a sign that the mayor's wife was understandably upset about her guest leaving so abruptly. Especially since she had a bad feeling the evening had been intended as her coming out party.

"Jordan, it's Cindy," the message began. "I just got your message from the other night. I've been swamped this week with all the prep for the Autumn Equinox Festival. Look, Chase filled me in on what happened at the diner and I just wanted to apologize. I never would’ve tried to set you up with Darren if I'd known what an ass he'd been. Let's get coffee soon and catch up. I'm free pretty much any day except Wednesday, so let me know. We need to talk about some…" The message broke off for a moment before she continued hastily with, "some things. Take care!"

Jordan's chest sank in relief. So Cindy wasn't angry after all. As pushy as the socialite was, Jordan had already taken a liking to her. In some ways, she reminded her of her own aunt Linda, but she—like so many of the memories Jordan had left behind in Arkansas—seemed to be from a lifetime ago.

Jordan jumped into the shower and pulled on her robe before going to check on her plants. She lovingly watered each one and gathered some clippings that she sealed away in labeled plastic bags to tend to later. After

logging some growth changes to send to her biggest client, she cast a brief glance at the empty space on the railing the long gone tincture had once occupied. She hadn't been to town since the party, mostly because she was afraid of running into Darren St. Clair again, but Jenna and her grandfather were often on her mind. She couldn't help but wonder if the older man was feeling the effects of the tincture yet.

Jordan frowned when she noticed some dark spots on the leaves of her holly. It was just a small plant, but it had been with her the longest and she had grown attached to it even more than the others. She had already broken far more important rules, so she passed her hand over the blotched areas and smiled in satisfaction when the bruised flesh turned green and vibrant once again.

"You're not going anywhere, little one," Jordan said, giving an affectionate caress to a newly hardy leaf. "You and me are in this together."

Returning inside, Jordan picked up the phone and dialed Cindy's number again. It went straight to voicemail, so she left a message suggesting the following night as a good time to meet. She placed the phone back in its cradle, but not before caressing the smooth, almost gel-like buttons. "Everything is so different out here," she murmured, recalling the cold, hard rotary of the one phone in the house her entire family had shared.

When the phone lit up and blared its siren, she fumbled to keep it in her hands. Still startled, she glanced at the unfamiliar number on the display before answering. "Hello?"

"Is this Jordan?" It was a vaguely familiar male voice, but she couldn't quite identify the speaker.

"Yes, who's this?" she asked, steadying her nerves and her voice.

"It's Darren."

"Dr. St. Clair?" She frowned. "How did you get this number?"

"It's a landline. You're listed in the town directory."

"Oh."

"Listen, I'm calling because the rumors about you are starting to get out of hand in town and I really think we should talk."

"You say that like you're not the one who started those rumors."

"I told you the other night I was sor --"

A sharp beep cut into the call and Jordan nearly dropped the phone. "Hang on a second, I think someone is calling in."

"Jordan, wait --"

She pressed the answer button before he could finish and only felt a little guilty for cutting him off. "Hello, Cindy?"

"Hello, miss," said a smooth, unfamiliar male voice. "Do you have a moment to take a brief survey?"

"Oh," she said, trying to mask her disappointment. "I guess so. Did you get this number out of the town directory?"

"Thanks, miss," the voice continued, as if reading from a script that tolerated no deviation. "Would you say you're happy with your current phone provider?"

"Um, I think so. I've only had it for a little while, though."

"I see, and your life?"

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Your life, Ms. Hurlow," the caller clarified. "Would you say you're satisfied with the way your life has turned out?"

Jordan's spine stiffened and goosebumps rose up on her arms at the sound of her former name. "Who is this?"

"And all the people who died in Arkansas because of you," he continued, "including your mother and brother, what about them? Would you say they're happy with the decisions you've made in your life?"

Jordan stared at the phone like it was going to bite her. "You're working for Hermes, aren't you? That awful man with the white hair and the strange eyes? Or did my father hire you?"

"Less than three months left," the caller announced before the line went dead. Jordan’s hands trembled with nervous rage as she set the phone back down.

It had to be a prank call. That didn't explain how he knew things no one else possibly could have known, and that ultimatum certainly pointed to Hermes, but she didn't want to believe that a cat was harassing her by phone. Even if she did believe it, who was she going to call? The police would just drive her to the nearest asylum if she explained what was going on.

Taking a deep breath, Jordan vowed to ignore it since she had little other recourse. She did, however, dress quickly so she could head into town. The first stop on her to-do list was the post office. Sure enough, Max was there leaning on the counter, reading a book with a title Jordan couldn't quite read. The clerk sniffed and looked up sharply before a lazy grin of recognition transformed his austere features.

"I was wondering when you were gonna pay me a visit."

"I haven't really needed to until now," Jordan said, holding up a small package of seedlings for one of her clients. "It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise," said Max, taking the package. He glanced at the mailing label. "Texas, huh?"

"I sell all sorts of things online," said Jordan. "I'm sure you're going to get sick of me before long."

"I doubt that."

Jordan cleared her throat. "I was hoping you could check and see if some other packages came in for me. I changed my address and everything, but they still haven't come."

"Missing packages, huh?" Max disappeared behind a wall of mailboxes. While he was gone, Jordan took a peek at the book. *The Metamorphosis* seemed like heavy reading for someone so laid-back. He returned a moment later with the two parcels under his arm.

"Looks like night shift didn't load them onto the truck. Hope they weren't important."

"Just some gardening books. It's no big deal," said Jordan.

"Green thumb, huh?" Max asked, leaning on the counter again.

"Yeah, it's kind of been a hobby ever since I can remember," Jordan said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Hopefully Max hadn't heard about her other hobbies. "Seemed like a natural fit to turn it into a job."

"That's cool. I can't keep anything alive," Max said with a dry laugh. "Black thumb."

"Everyone has different gifts," said Jordan. "What do you like to do? Besides masquerading as a valet."

Max smirked. "I work on cars. Old ones. Sometimes I race, too, but Aunt Cindy doesn't need to know that."

"She would probably pass out," Jordan agreed, smiling. "She's been so kind to me ever since I came into town."

"Yeah, she's like that. She's always been my favorite aunt."

"You must have a big family."

"Very big." Max rolled his eyes. For a moment, Jordan was worried Max was going to ask about her family. Instead, he moved on to a different topic. "Have you talked to Darren yet?"

"Only for a second," Jordan said guiltily. "I've kind of been avoiding him, to tell the truth. I know it's awfully petty of me."

"Nah, let him sweat a little," Max said with a wink. "He's cool, but if that stick goes any further up his ass he'll choke on it. He could use a good lesson."

Jordan pursed her lips and tried not to laugh. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Just don't let him intimidate you. He's all bark and no bite." Max paused. "Unless you're Chase Wilde, that is."

"Yeah, I could tell. Darren looked like he was ready to punch him at the party."

"Damn, I would've paid to see that."

“Chase doesn't seem so bad," she said hesitantly.

Max snorted. "He *seems* like a mannequin. Trust me, you're better off staying away from the guy. At least with Darren what you see is what you get."

"I'd be kind of a hypocrite if I avoided someone just because of rumors."

"It's not that. It's --" Max cut himself off and seemed to be considering whether he wanted to say something or not. Jordan had her misgivings about anything someone like Max would feel the need to censor. "Something is just off about him."

"Like what?" Jordan asked, a bit uneasily.

"I don't know, aside from the hearsay," Max admitted. "But I know my gut’s never been wrong. Good instincts kinda run in the family."

"Well, thank you for the warning," Jordan said, taking it more seriously than she had Darren's. At least Max didn't seem to have a vendetta against Chase. Jordan reached across the counter for her packages. "I'd better get going."

"I'm off work in a minute. Want me to carry those home for you?"

Jordan blinked in surprise at the offer. "That's nice of you, but I'm actually heading to the market," she said, slipping the packages into one of the reusable bags she had brought for produce. "They're not that heavy."

"Yeah, of course," Max said with a stiff laugh. "Enjoy the rest of your day, Jordan."

"You, too," she said, waving at the clerk before she left. Maybe Darren was just an exception. Cold Creek's other residents were shaping up to be almost too friendly, if anything.

The market square came into view and Jordan took a deep breath. Being around large crowds of people was not something she usually enjoyed, but

it felt safer than being alone. Talking with Max had been a nice distraction, but the market was only open so late. After the phone call she had received earlier, Jordan was thinking about chatting up the perpetually salty Mrs. Herrin just for an excuse not to have to go back to her apartment right away.

The market was a bit further than the town square, but it was a nice day so she decided to walk. Armed with a pair of canvas bags for her planned purchases, she did her best to ignore the strange looks she was getting. The town gossip was a trivial but welcome distraction from threats of the supernatural persuasion.

The closer Jordan got to the market, the more stares she received. A few were glares and most just were curious glances, but it was the smattering of awe-filled gazes that disturbed her. As she made it to the edge of the crowded market space, she quickly realized that there was no brushing the attention she was getting away as mere self-consciousness. The crowds all but parted as Jordan walked down the row of vendor booths.

Furtive whispers abounded, and although it was difficult to make out more than a stray word here or there, those stray words told a story Jordan wasn't all too keen on.

"Jenna's grandfather."

"Cured."

"Miracle."

She gulped and tried to focus on selecting a small bushel of golden apples from one of the less-crowded vendors. She wasn't particularly fond of apples, but it was something to occupy herself with.

The pockmarked teenager behind the booth gawked at her as she tried to offer him a ten-dollar bill for the bushel.

"It's free," he said.

"That's very nice of you, but I can't just take these. Please --"

He pushed her hand away. "Nah, keep your money. Just remember this if Stacey Pikman ever asks you to put a hex on me."

Jordan stared at him in bewilderment for a moment before his words sank in. "I've never cursed anyone in my life. Look, I know everyone has seen those tabloids by now, but--"

"It's not the tabloids," he said quickly. "Everyone knows what you did for Stu Herbert. He used to be really sharp until he got sick and started forgetting all kinds of things. Now he's in the diner, reciting everyone's

birthdays and names. Stuff even I couldn't remember, and I've lived in this town my whole life. It's like he's better than he was before."

Jordan's heart quickened in fear. So Jenna had spilled the beans. Well, she was a teenage girl whose only living relative had just been miraculously healed. Jordan couldn't really blame her for talking, but that certainly meant her life in Cold Creek was about to get a lot more difficult. If Darren had wanted to run her out of town before, she could only imagine what he would do now.

"I'm glad he's doing better, but I didn't have anything to do with it."

He snorted. "Everyone's seen that cat you saved. He's fine, he's not even missing a whisker."

Hermes certainly was making his rounds. Jordan carefully placed the apples back on the table. "I'm sorry, I think I should go."

When she stepped back, she collided with something solid and massive hands closed around her arms like a vice to steady her. Turning around, she found herself staring up at a wall of a man with a gleaming scalp and the hard-lined face of a life spent in authority. He was wearing street clothes, but Jordan had seen enough policemen and soldiers in her lifetime to know with absolute certainty that he was one or the other. She vaguely recognized him from the diner.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking a step back. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"You the witch girl?"

She gulped. "I'm not a witch, but I'm the one everyone is talking about."

"Did you heal Stu Herbert?"

Her pulse beat so hard in her temples that it felt like her veins might pop. "I didn't do anything of the sort."

He frowned. "I've known Jenna Herbert since she came into this world and if the girl ain't one thing, it's a liar."

"I never meant to imply that, sir, I just --"

His hand closed around her arm again only this time his grip was more forceful than helpful. "What is it you want? Money?"

Jordan pulled and finally freed her arm only because the behemoth allowed it. "I don't want anything. I told you, if Stu Herbert is better, it's not because of anything I did. Am I under arrest?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard. "No," he said slowly.

"Then I'd like to leave. Excuse me, please," she said, taking a step around him.

The crowd that had gone silent while watching the exchange parted as Jordan made a beeline down the dirt path. To her relief, there was no one following her when she finally dared to look back.

It still wasn't until well past the town square that Jordan felt like she could breathe a little easier. She berated herself with each step for being foolish enough to think she could keep such a reckless display of magic under wraps in a quiet town. Maybe she really would be better off in the city.

She stopped suddenly and made a split-second decision to take the detour home through the alley where she had first encountered the cat familiar, or whatever he really was. It was daytime, after all, and the main road would be crowded with people who had questions she didn't want to answer.

Jordan froze suddenly as she heard what sounded the scraping of shoes on the brick path, unless her imagination was deceiving her. She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder only to find that the alleyway was perfectly empty.

Breathing a mixed sigh of relief and embarrassment at her own jumpiness, Jordan continued past the butcher's shop and was relieved to discover that the spot where she had first found the cat was empty, too. Only a vague stain on the brick existed as proof that anything had happened there at all.

Another noise came from up ahead, this one louder and more of a clanging sound. A trash can lid rolled out from one of the alley's detours and she glimpsed a flash of brilliant white fur. Driven more by curiosity than courage, Jordan rounded the corner only to find a possum hissing protectively over the seven small babies clinging to its back.

"Sorry, guys," she said, backing up slowly only to collide with something that hadn't been there a moment before.

It was the man from the marketplace. The color drained from her face as Jordan turned to run, only to be grabbed by the wrist and thrown against the wall. With the wind knocked out of her, Jordan had no time to react before the man's hand closed around her throat.

"I know a liar when I see one, girl," he said in a calm tone. "You healed Stu Herbert and you can do it again. I want to know how."

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she choked, resisting the urge to struggle. "It was just a placebo effect."

The man let out a frustrated growl and Jordan was sure he was going to strike her, but he didn't. Instead, he jerked her purse off her shoulder with such force that the leather strap snapped, but not before her shoulder made a loud popping sound of its own. He dug through her bag, tossing aside its contents.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

Before she could formulate an answer, footsteps raced down the alley. *More of them?*

"Hank!" Darren's voice boomed through the alley. In an instant, the vet was between large man and Jordan. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Darren was no waif with a strong build and broad shoulders, but Hank far exceeded him both in height and in bulk. Nonetheless, the man's demeanor changed instantly and he stepped back on Darren's authority alone.

"She's got a miracle cure and she's holding out," Hank said, pointing accusatorily in Jordan's direction. "That's what's the matter."

"Miracle cure?" Darren's face contorted into an expression of pure disappointment. "Of all people, Hank, *you*?"

Hank's face reddened, but it was hard to tell if he was embarrassed or just angry. "You wouldn't understand."

"Maybe not," said Darren. "I know you've been through hell with Susan’s illness, but you're the last person I'd expect to fall for all this mumbo jumbo bullshit. If she had any idea you were threatening some girl in an alley for her sake, she'd be just as ashamed of you as I am."

Hank's shoulders sank to make him only slightly less of a mountain. "But Stu Herbert --"

"Stu Herbert has access to the best medical care in the Northeast," Darren said firmly. "He's been given experimental drugs, natural supplements and cognitive therapy, and yet for some reason you think it's some new age hippy's magic brew that did the trick?"

Hank went silent. Darren's words stung, but Jordan wasn't about to defend herself. When he put it like that, even she couldn't help but wonder if it hadn't really been the tincture after all.

"Go on," Darren said without waiting for Hank to argue. "Get out of here and so help me God, if I find you anywhere near her again, you're gonna need a miracle cure yourself."

To Jordan's amazement, Hank cast one last menacing glance her way before skulking off down the alley.

Darren turned to Jordan immediately, looking her up and down with keen eyes. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she lied, still holding her arm. She could have handled it herself, but she doubted he'd believe it. Part of her was glad she hadn't called on any of the darker elements of nature she had access to as a born witch now that she knew Hank's motivation.

She blamed herself, just like she had after the fallout from the last town she'd slipped up in. Magic had a way of bringing out the worst in people, even if it was of the healing variety.

*Especially* then.

Darren frowned. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she muttered, rubbing her shoulder joint in hopes of waking her arm up. She could feel touch, but her arm hung limp at her side and couldn't be willed to move.

Darren's brow furrowed. "If you don't tell me what's wrong, I'm going to have to assume you need to be taken to the emergency room."

She sighed. "When he grabbed my purse, it did something to my arm."

"Your arm or your shoulder?" he asked, applying a small amount of pressure to the joint.

Jordan jerked away and winced at the pain the movement caused.

"Easy," Darren said in a soothing tone that Jordan had a bad feeling was the same one he used on the horses he treated. The next time he reached for her arm, she let him.

"It's my shoulder," she grudgingly admitted.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when I try to move it."

"You said it hurt when he grabbed your purse. What did it feel like, a pop or a crunch?" he asked, gently raising her arm.

"Um, a pop?"

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

"Well, it's dislocated," he said. "The good news is I could pop it back in, but if you'd rather go to a hospital --"

"No," she said quickly. "I don't like doctors."

He eyed her skeptically but he didn't press the issue. "It'll hurt for a second."

"That's fine. As long as it's quick."

"It will be," he promised, settling his hands on either side of her shoulder. Before Jordan could wrap her mind around what was going to happen, he gave her arm a swift, sharp jerk and the joint popped back into place.

“Son of a bitch,” Jordan hissed.

The look of shock on Darren’s face warred with his amusement. ”Sorry, but it's easier if you don't see it coming and you did say to make it quick."

Jordan sighed, rubbing her arm. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"How's it feel now?"

She moved her arm slightly, surprised that the pain had already begun to fade. "It feels a lot better, thanks."

Darren smiled for the first time since she had met him. It was a surprisingly pleasant smile, even if it didn't quite meet his tired eyes. "You sure you didn't hit your head or anything?" he asked, taking her head in his hands as he gently pressed around her scalp.

"I'm sure," she said, stepping back from him. "Only my back hit the wall."

"He threw you against the wall?"

The wave of fury that crashed over his features made her regret accidentally revealing that little detail. Why he cared so much was beyond her. He certainly didn’t *seem* like the chivalrous type. “Yes, but I'm fine. Really."

Darren watched her in silence for a moment, clearly warring with himself over something. "At least let me escort you to the police station."

"Police?" Jordan asked, confused.

"To press charges," he explained, as if it should be obvious. "Hank is a good man under normal circumstances, but there's no excuse for what he did. I hate to see this happen, but this was assault pure and simple and if a night in the county jail is what it takes to knock some sense into him, so be it."

"No, I’m not interested in going to the police,“ Jordan said, kneeling to gather her things and return them to her broken purse. "There's no need as long as he stays away from me."

The last thing she needed was to be at the center of what was sure to be the town’s only documented crime in years. Her attempt to stay under the radar was already an abject failure.

Darren fell silent again, but Jordan could feel his eyes on her. "He will," he said at length. "I'll make sure of it."

"He's lucky to have you as a friend," she said quietly. She peered over her slipping glasses to see Darren kneeling in front of her, offering a tube of lipstick that had fallen out of her purse.

"We're not friends," he said, reaching out to push the glasses into their rightful position on the bridge of her nose. "Like I said before, I feel responsible for the people of this town."

Jordan's cheeks grew strangely warm as she took the hand he offered to help her up. "I guess it's the town that's lucky, then."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and watched her so closely it made her squirm inside. "Since you won't go to the hospital, I'd feel a lot better if you stuck close so I can observe you for any signs of a head injury. Would you reconsider that cup of coffee?"

She hesitated. "I don't think going out again is such a good idea. Not with all the things people are saying about Stu Herbert."

"So come over to my place," he said, then winced. "I really didn't mean that the way it probably sounded."

Jordan laughed a little. Maybe it was the fact that he had come to her rescue, or maybe she really had sustained a head injury without realizing it, but the vet's “charms” were finally starting to work on her. "It did sound pretty bad," she admitted. “But I guess I could give you a second chance to make a better impression.”

Darren grinned. “That would be generous of you.”

“I’m a good witch, remember?” she teased, following him out of the alleyway.

Darren rolled his eyes. “Right.”

If only he knew she wasn’t kidding.

# SEVEN

"CREAM AND SUGAR?" Darren asked, setting the additives down on his coffee table. His apartment above the clinic was larger than Jordan would have guessed from the outside. It was every bit the stereotypical bachelor pad with a leather couch and chair, a flat screen TV and very little in the way of décor. If she had to venture a guess, the refrigerator was filled with beer and takeout containers.

"I'm fine, thanks."

Darren finally sat down after having made a quick dash around the living room to pick up the stray laundry that had gathered on the floor.

"Sorry for the mess," he grumbled, leaping up to grab a shirt he had missed on the arm rest. "I don't have people over often."

"No, it's... charming," she said, taking a sip of her coffee.

Darren watched her carefully for a moment and seemed about to ask something before he changed his mind. "I'm sorry your first couple of weeks in town have been so shitty."

“I’m used to it. Trouble tends to follow me wherever I go.”

“So I’ve noticed. Where are you from, anyway?"

"That didn't come up in your investigation?" she half-teased.

"That's the thing. I could only trace you back to Oakwood and a few more small towns around the southeast before that. Nothing long-term."

Her eyes widened. "You really did do your research, didn't you?"

"Know thy enemy," Darren said dryly, taking a sip of his own coffee. He also took it black, she noticed. Everything about the man was understated.

"Am I really your enemy, Dr. St. Clair?" she asked, not quite sure that was a task she was up to.

He considered it for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. "I don't really think you're here to start trouble. You could have started plenty of it with Hank, and even I wouldn't have blamed you for it."

"You said Hank was a good person and my intuition tells me you're not the type to believe the best about someone without good reason," she admitted.

He coughed. "I must have come up while you were talking to Chase."

"Just a bit."

"And what else did he have to say about me?"

"That you're an insufferable militant atheist with a superiority complex," she replied after taking a moment to recall that part of their conversation.

He laughed. "Can't say he's wrong there."

"What happened to Hank's wife?" she asked, deciding to just come out with the question that had been nagging her since the alley. "Is she sick?"

He looked about to answer but shook his head and set his cup down. "Tell you what, I'll trade you. An answer for an answer. You tell me where you're from and I'll give you the rundown on Hank."

"You drive a hard bargain, Dr. St. Clair."

"Darren." Unlike Chase, she got the feeling he wanted her to call her by his first name merely for the sake of convenience rather than to forge a sense of familiarity between them.

"Alright, Darren," she said, hesitating. "I grew up in Arkansas and I lived there until a little over a year ago. There are no records of Jordan Adams before that point because she didn't exist."

He took that in for a moment, his face impassive. "Even a name change would leave some record. Unless --"

"Unless the court sealed it," she replied quietly. "No offense, but I don't want to know about Hank badly enough to tell you why."

"In other words, I'm not going to find anything if I keep looking into you."

"You're pretty perceptive."

He snorted. "For a guy who spends all his time with animals, I guess I am."

Jordan smiled a little. "I think people who spend most of their time in nature are the most perceptive of all. Clarity comes with distance and all

that."

"I guess I owe you an answer now," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Hank's story is pretty much the story of Cold Creek. Decades ago we were just like any other small town in America, struggling through the depression of the eighties. A big manufacturing plant came in and promised jobs, maybe even a real economy. The mayor at the time—Henry's father, actually--just signed on the dotted line without looking at the fine print, and no one wanted him to."

He paused. "I should say no one with the exception of my father, but no one listens to the town doctor when that kind of money is at stake. Back then, no one cared about the environmental impact of a big manufacturing plant. No one thought about the cost of all those car parts flying off the assembly lines as long as they were made in America. At least, not until people started getting sick."

"And Hank's wife was one of them?"

"Yep. Susan was a real sweet lady who worked on the assembly lines. She used to make cookies for the neighborhood kids. I was still on training wheels then, but I remember everyone talking about how sad it was that she and Hank couldn't have kids of their own. Turned out a lot of folks couldn't. That was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to what the plant was doing to Cold Creek. Not just to the people, either."

"The animals," Jordan murmured.

He nodded solemnly. "All those forests are empty. Last year, Cindy started this big campaign to install bird feeders all over town but they wouldn't come here on their own."

"So what happened to Susan?" Jordan asked nervously.

"Brain tumor," he replied. "Her case was one of the most severe, even though she didn't get sick until a good ten years after she left the factory. By then, others weren't doing well. They started getting diagnosed with every type of cancer you've heard of, a few even I hadn't, and a whole host of other problems. Susan didn't know she was sick until she had a stroke, and not long after that another one sent her into a coma."

Jordan swallowed the knot in her throat. "How long has she been like that?"

Darren leaned back with his hands behind his neck and took a deep breath. "Going on six years now, I'd say. Hank became a cop the second he graduated high school, and he was up for early retirement when Susan got

sick. He jumped ship to take care of her. Took a job as security guard in the hospice wing just so he could always keep an eye on her."

"I can see why you think so highly of him, then."

"I don't," he said. "He got dealt a bad hand, but that doesn't excuse what he did. Susan would have killed him for it, but like everyone else in this town, Hank's broken and he has been ever since that damn factory closed and left us to pick up the pieces. Even those of us who didn't get sick know someone who did. Once the plant left, so did most of the jobs. People have found a way to make due like they always do, but they're desperate for hope. If they think there's an easy way out, a miracle to grasp for--"

"They'll take it," Jordan said quietly.

"No matter what it costs them."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know what you must think of me, but I never intended to cause problems. I just wanted a place to start over."

"I don't know why, but I believe you," he said, frowning. "I shouldn't. You walk into town surrounded by rumors and within a week, half the town is calling you a messiah and the other half..." He trailed off and Jordan wasn't curious enough to want to know what it was the other half were saying. "Let's just say I don't know which is worse."

"And you?" she asked, meeting his eyes for the first time. "What do you think I am?"

He held her gaze for a long while. So long, in fact, that Jordan thought she might not get an answer. Finally, he said, "At first, I thought you were a fraud."

She laughed a little as the tension dissipated. "And now? If I'm not a fraud, what am I?"

The corner of his lip twitched. "A gullible idiot was my next best guess."

"Ah," she murmured. "I think I'd rather be a fraud, if it's all the same."

He laughed. "No, I think I was wrong about you on both counts, Jordan. You're not a fraud or an idiot. In fact, I think you're something much worse."

Her eyes widened and she leaned forward a little. "What's that?"

"A mystery," he replied, a hint of seriousness laced throughout his joking tone.

"I don't see how that's worse."

"A charlatan tells you what to believe, and you can take it or leave it," he replied. "And an idiot doesn't know what to believe. But a mystery lets you project all your ideas and hopes and dreams onto it, and it all just comes right back at you in the end."

"Well, I don't know if I'll stick around long enough for that to happen. Not after what happened with Stu Herbert."

"What exactly did happen with Stu Herbert?" he asked, frowning.

"Jenna Herbert can't keep a secret, that's what," she muttered. "Not that I blame her."

"You don't seriously expect me to believe your little magic games had anything to do with that."

She shrugged. "I don't expect you to believe anything."

Darren raked a hand through his hair, sighing. "What made you set your sights on Cold Creek, anyway?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I was just drawn to it. It's hard to explain."

"Especially to a militant atheist, I'm sure," he said, smirking.

Jordan pursed her lips to fight a smile. "If the shoe fits, Doctor."

"What are you, anyway?" he asked. "Wiccan? Druid?"

"Pentecostal, actually."

"Come again?"

She laughed. "I don't know what I am, really, or if I'm anything at all, but that's what I grew up as."

"Wow," he said, taking a long pause. "So, how does all the voodoo stuff jive with Peter, Paul and Mary?"

"You'd be surprised. Look, I know you don't believe in any of this, but I didn't choose God any more than I chose the 'voodoo stuff.' They both chose me and I just want to put it all behind me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Not off to a very good start, are you?"

"No," she said in a sullen tone. "I'm not."

"Well, I can't say I get it, but you should be careful. This is probably the worst place you could’ve chosen to start over."

"I'm starting to realize that."

"No offense, but I think your intuition needs to be recalibrated."

"Wouldn't be the first time. Is it my turn to ask a question?"

"Sure, but I'm gonna need some more coffee," he said, getting up to make a fresh pot. The small kitchen was more of an annex to the living

room than a standalone.

"Why don't you believe in anything? In anything supernatural, I mean."

Darren glanced over his shoulder as he poured some fresh grounds into the machine. "Living in Cold Creek, the real question is, how could I believe in anything? Once you've seen folks you grew up down the road from die choking on their own blood, it's hard to think there's a rhyme or reason to it all." He leaned against the counter, a far-off look in his eyes. "And trust me, those were the lucky ones. The rest just withered away year after year until there was nothing left but a husk. Half the time the people who love them most don't even realize what's happening. If believing in a big family reunion in the sky gives them consolation, I'm not about to take that away from them, but as for me? If God exists, he can take his mysterious ways and his divine will and shove it where the angels don't fly."

Jordan listened in silence, flinching at a few of his more blasphemous comments. She knew she was far from the ideal preacher's daughter, but the superstition still lingered.

"Sorry," he said with a dry laugh. "Like I said, Chase wasn't far off in his assessment of me."

"Don't be sorry. I did ask, just probably not for the reason you think."

He gave her a confused look as he brought the fresh pot of coffee over and refilled their mugs. "No?"

"I guess I just envy you, that's all," she admitted.

His brow furrowed in deeper confusion. "How's that?"

"I didn't want to know why you're an atheist so I could convince you to believe," she said, blowing on the steaming cup. "I guess I was hoping you might say something that could convince me not to."

Darren stared at her in a look that seemed somewhere between bewilderment and pity. He finally shook his head, setting his mug down. "You know, Jordan Adams--or whoever the hell you really are--you're the weirdest damn person I've ever met, and that's saying a lot in this town."

"Gee, tell me how you really feel."

"I don't mean it as an insult, just an observation. You got run out of your last town for practicing witchcraft of all things, you're originally from the Bible Belt, and yet you claim you want to be an atheist," he said pointedly. "That doesn't sound at all strange to you?"

"I guess it does when you put it like that."

He laughed and for once it wasn't a short, dry laugh. It was a real laugh that made his gray eyes flash like silver. "I still think you should get the hell out of town, but I can't say I'd mind it if you stayed."

Jordan smiled. "I can't say I'd mind, either."

Darren glanced up at the clock and Jordan followed his gaze. "It's getting late," she murmured.

"It's dark anyway," he said. "Why don't you stay for another cup and then I'll walk you home?"

She hesitated. There was something refreshing about being around Darren, as if the strength of his certainty in the material world was enough to create a bubble where strange gifts and even stranger cats were easily explained away. In that bubble, she found more peace than years of prayer for deliverance had ever afforded her.

"Well," she said, "maybe just one more cup."

# EIGHT

TEN HOURS and one sunrise later, Jordan stumbled into her apartment. Somehow, despite the fact that the coffee that had turned into beer, she had managed to avoid waking Mrs. Herrin on her stumbling voyage up the stairs. It had taken her awhile to convince Darren that she would be alright on her own. He was, she had determined over the course of the evening, a high-functioning alcoholic who was no worse for the wear after nine beers while she was seeing stars after three.

Despite the confirmation of her lightweight status, the evening had been one of the most enjoyable that she could remember. Darren was a fascinating man, even though he was only slightly less secretive about his past than she was. He deflected questions about his home life, but freely recounted his experiences in college and the year he had spent studying abroad in Belfast. He spoke passionately of his love of animals and his last-minute decision not to follow directly in his father's footsteps, dropping out of medical school in his second year to attend veterinary school instead.

What struck her most was his love for Cold Creek and the fact that Darren had turned down numerous opportunities to live in far more interesting places. He had graduated in the top one percent of his class and yet he chose to practice and live at home. The town's only hope in the wake of the industrial aftermath had been to turn to farming the land and trying to repair some of the environmental damage the factory had done, he explained. The farmers needed a veterinarian to keep their livestock healthy, and there would always be guard dogs and beloved family pets to look after. It wasn't the most exciting work in the world, but he found satisfaction in

giving something back to the town that had given him so much after his parents had passed away.

He didn't say the words, of course. Whenever the conversation turned to his parents, Darren grew distant and vague, but Jordan knew they were gone as surely as if he had admitted it out loud. She also knew better than to pry.

Thankfully, so did he.

As Jordan poured herself into bed, snippets of their conversation swirled through her head. Maybe if she hadn't had so much to drink, she would have noticed that the window was open.

Jordan woke to the sound of pounding on her door. She jolted and looked around to get her bearings. Her head throbbed like she had never imagined possible and she thought briefly of braving the hospital. Then she remembered her father's lectures about the drunkards who reaped the painful rewards of their debauchery the morning after and realized with some mixed feelings of relief and shame that she wasn't dying, just experiencing the consequences of sin.

The pounding grew more insistent, driving a new spike through her temple each time. "I'm coming," she called, cradling her head as she stumbled to her feet. She finger-combed her messy hair and braced herself for an angry mob before opening the door.

Mrs. Herrin was standing there with one hand planted on her hip and a scowl on her face. Jordan decided then and there that she would much rather deal with the angry mob. The elderly woman made no attempt to hide her judgment at the fact that Jordan was wearing the same clothes as the day before.

"You been out on your balcony?"

"No?" Jordan asked in confusion, smoothing out her skirt. "I must have fallen asleep while I was working."

Mrs. Herrin gave her a knowing sneer. "I've done the walk of shame too many times in my day to have a thing to say about that, but I can't stand a liar. Especially not a bad one."

Jordan blushed. "I'm sorry," she said immediately. "I was out late with a friend."

"I know you were out with Darren St. Clair," Mrs. Herrin said with certainty. "Gave him a piece of my mind for bringing you home like that, too. His daddy raised him better than that."

"It wasn't his fault, really," she insisted. "I'm just not much of a drinker. I should have known my own limits."

"Well, you're gonna need another drink when you see what's on the balcony," she said. "I know how much you like those flowers."

"My flowers?" Alarm chased away the lingering haze in her mind. "What happened to them?"

Mrs. Herrin gestured past Jordan to the glass door. "See for yourself."

Jordan rushed outside, joined a moment later by her landlord. She surveyed the damage in horror as every pot that had been so carefully balanced on the wide balcony railing was smashed on the drive below. Jordan covered her face to stifle a mournful gasp. "Oh, no..."

Mrs. Herrin peered over the railing apprehensively. "Must have happened in the night. I sleep with the fan on and you obviously weren't around to hear it."

"Do you think it could have been an animal?" Jordan asked doubtfully.

"Big animal," she snorted. "Anyway, we don't get many wild animals around these parts. The old factory spooks 'em off and the wolves do the rest. Looks like someone was trying to spook you, too."

"You're sure you didn't see anyone around last night?" Jordan asked. Wolves didn't scare her much, but people certainly did. Strange that Darren hadn't mentioned them, though.

Mrs. Herrin shook her head. "This is the end of the road. Folks don't come around here, not unless they're looking to cut through the woods.

Jordan sighed. "I'm sorry. I'll go down and clean it up right now."

"I'll grab a couple of brooms, won't take us long," said Mrs. Herrin. "You can get some new pots at the hardware store. I'm sure most of them can be salvaged."

"Thanks, Mrs. Herrin," Jordan said with a grateful smile.

"You can call me Julia, but I know you won't," the woman said, offering a faint smile in return. Jordan was quite sure that was a rarity.

"I probably won't, but thank you all the same," she said, following her downstairs.

The damage looked even worse from the ground, but Mrs. Herrin was right. Most of the plants could be salvaged. To Jordan's relief, the little holly was one of them. Even the rarest in her collection could be grown again and clients could be assuaged, but the holly was irreplaceable. The dirt and broken pottery pieces were swept into trash bins easily enough, and

Jordan began the process of planting her salvageable plants in plastic bags filled with soil until she could get to the hardware store.

"You sure you don't know who could've done this?" asked Mrs. Herrin. "I know you've made some waves in town."

Jordan thought of Hank immediately but shook her head. There had to be others in town who were at least as desperate as he was. She didn't see a point in singling him out without proof. Not after what Darren had told her about his wife. "No one in particular. I would understand if you wanted me to find another place to live, though, what with all the rumors and then this mess."

Mrs. Herrin scoffed, shoving a hopelessly mangled plant into a garbage bag. Jordan cringed but was relieved that she wasn't the one having to do it. "The day I make my decisions on account of a few nutjobs and bigots is the day I lie down and die."

Jordan smiled. "Well, thank you. And thanks for the help. I'm sure you have better things to do."

"I'll take any excuse to miss book club," she replied. "That damn Tina Long can talk your ear off."

Jordan laughed. "She does seem enthusiastic."

"She's a nuisance and a drunk, that's what she is," Julia replied, standing up straight to scowl into the distance under her visor. A moment later, Jordan recognized the outline of a man walking towards them. "Speaking of drunks. Looks like one of your suitors has arrived."

Jordan spun around, terrified that the white-haired man was making another appearance. As the outline became clear, she remembered what he had said about only being human on the full moon. "Darren?" She set aside the plant she was holding and jogged to meet him halfway. "What are you doing here?"

He glanced at the dirt on her hands. "I felt bad about last night, so I thought I'd bring you some hangover remedies on my break," he replied. As he looked past her, she could tell from the dark circles under his eyes that he hadn't slept well, either. "What happened here?"

Jordan glanced back to see that Mrs. Herrin was coming to join them. "Jordan's balcony was vandalized last night."

"We don't know that for sure," said Jordan.

"Who was it?" Darren asked, squaring his shoulders.

"That's what we've been trying to sort out," said Mrs. Herrin.

Jordan sighed, feeling ignored. "It's not a big deal, really."

"Not a big deal?" Mrs. Herrin scoffed. "You damn near cried when you saw those plants on the ground."

Darren frowned, looking down at Jordan. "Look, it was generous of you not to press charges against Hank, but this is turning into harassment."

"Hank?" Mrs. Herrin interrupted. "Hank Thomas? What's he got to do with this mess?"

"He jumped Jordan in the alleyway," Darren muttered.

"What?" she nearly shrieked. "That's not like Hank."

"I know," he said in a somber tone. "But you've seen how he's changed. All this Stu Herbert stuff has just made him worse. I should've gone to the police last night when it happened."

Mrs. Herrin considered his words thoughtfully. "This is getting out of hand."

"It was my responsibility to go to the police and I chose not to," said Jordan. "It's my fault all this is going on in the first place."

"Don't start taking credit for Stu Herbert," Darren warned. "That's just going to make everything worse."

"Well, did you heal Stu?" asked Mrs. Herrin.

Darren groaned. "Not you, too, Julia."

"That's Mrs. Herrin to you, boy," she snapped. "I changed your diapers."

Jordan tried to stifle a laugh as Darren's face grew red. She never would have imagined that he was capable of getting flustered, and it was a very welcome distraction from the subject matter at hand.

"Look, if anything else happens, I promise I'll go to the police," said Jordan. "I just don't want to go through all that without having good evidence that it was him. Especially not with his wife in the hospital."

Darren watched her, as if considering whether he was going to accept her decision. "Fine," he said reluctantly. "But if one more thing happens, I'm going to the Sheriff myself."

"And I'll go with you," said Mrs. Herrin.

"I'd like to stick around at night, though. Just for a couple of nights to keep an eye out," said Darren.

Jordan frowned. "That's really not necessary."

"I insist."

"So do I," said Mrs. Herrin. "We're two women living alone out in the boonies. I'd feel safer knowing a man is around. First the wolves, now this."

"There are no wolves, Mrs. Herrin," Darren said gruffly, like the subject was one that tired him. "We've talked about this."

"I know what you say and I know what that kook from Fish and Wildlife says, but I'm telling you both, I know a wolf's howl when I hear one," she said firmly.

Darren rolled his eyes. "I'll be back tonight a little after dark."

Jordan sighed. If it made Mrs. Herrin feel safer, she could hardly argue. Not after everything the landlady had done for her. "Well, thank you."

"You can wait on the porch," said Mrs. Herrin, pointing to the screened-in room on the side of the house. "I'll leave some blankets on the swing."

"Great, I'll come over tonight," said Darren. And just like that, it was settled. Mrs. Herrin and Darren discussed some town matters for a few minutes. Darren wanted her advice on a patient since she had grown up around horses. Her non-professional opinion was that Peter Smith's horse was schizophrenic and could probably be ridden again with the proper medication. Before long, the conversation turned back to Jordan's ruined plants.

"Can I help?" asked Darren.

"No, we're pretty much finished," said Mrs. Herrin.

"Yeah, all I have to do is run to the hardware store for some more pots," said Jordan.

"I should get back to the clinic then," Darren said, glancing at his watch. "I'll be back this evening, so if you hear anything it's probably just me."

Mrs. Herrin waved and wandered back into the house, leaving Jordan and Darren alone. She crossed her arms and waited awkwardly, newly embarrassed that she hadn't changed her clothes yet.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I really am sorry about last night."

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Jordan said with a laugh. “It's not your fault I'm a lightweight."

"I just wanted you to know I don't make a habit of inviting women over to my apartment to drink. Or inviting women over period. Not that I invite men over either, it's just --"

"I get it," she said, interrupting to put him out of his misery. "You don't have to explain; I can tell you're not like that."

"Ah, right. Intuition?"

She thought about it for a moment before shaking her head. "No, it's not that."

He arched an eyebrow. "So what *does* your intuition tell you about me?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

"I think it is," she admitted, tucking her hair behind her ear as the wind tried to carry it off. "It's refreshing."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Yeah," he said, "you took the words right out of my mouth."

# NINE

JORDAN FELL ASLEEP MUCH EASIER that night knowing that Darren was keeping watch downstairs, even if she was sure she'd have to turn over her proud independent witch card if she ever admitted it. Not that the good doctor needed any help in the ego department. Despite the ease with which rest came, her dreams were anything but peaceful.

Nearly every night, it was more of the same. That awful basement room, ages spent cowering and hiding in the closet that had been her entire world for more of her life than she liked to think about. The magic hadn't been in her control back then. It was something only her father seemed able to control, and he wielded her like a ventriloquist's dummy. Whenever he was done using her for his stage shows masquerading as holy services, he'd put her back in that awful, dark box to languish until the next time.

The fact that she'd escaped from that box a long time ago and was now free of his influence did nothing to keep the dreams at bay. Every morning, the sensation of near-suffocation and claustrophobic panic woke her from her fitful sleep and it took a few minutes to remind herself that she was living her own life thousands of miles away from the minister and that awful attic room.

Showering did little to erase the ghostly essence of stale attic air from her skin, so Jordan got dressed and decided to run some errands before she got started on processing her latest online orders.

Going into town after her unpleasant encounter with Hank had to happen eventually. Darren had kept his promise to keep watch downstairs the night before, but there hadn't been any more strange sightings or

overturned plants. Jordan knew that the longer she stayed isolated, the more the gossip about her would flourish.

She had spent long enough hiding. Maybe she had messed up by helping Stu Herbert, but she wasn't willing to throw in the towel and give up on her new start just yet. She told herself it didn't have anything to do with Darren St. Clair and by the time she'd finished her shopping, she almost believed it.

"Jordan," called a pleasant voice from the other side of the aisle.

Chase's friendly face appeared a moment later and Jordan noticed he was carrying a basket of the kind of food only people who drank from recyclable water bottles and ate inordinate amounts of kale seemed to eat. "Fancy seeing you here."

"It's a small town," she laughed. "I'm surprised I haven't seen you around sooner."

"Well, I do split my time between here and New York," he said, still smiling. Didn't the man's face ever get tired?

"New York?" she asked, surprised. "That's a hike."

"It is, but I do a lot of consulting work there."

"Yeah. I can imagine there's not a full-time caseload in a town this size."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," he said dryly. He watched her and Jordan couldn't help but wonder at the suspicion in his gaze. Given the way everyone talked about him, Chase was the one *she* had reason to be wary of.

Not that she liked entertaining the suspicions of gossips. She'd been their favorite topic often enough. "How've you been?"

"Well, thanks." His brows furrowed in concern. "I hope you're doing alright. I heard about what happened the other night with Hank Thomas."

"Oh, that. It was nothing," she said, hoping that the more readily she dismissed it, the sooner everyone else would shut up about it. Hank was far from her favorite person, but controversy led to press and getting back on her father's radar was the very last thing she wanted.

"It didn't sound like nothing." His frown deepened and his voice grew stiffer. "I heard Darren came to the rescue."

Now Jordan was the one frowning. "I wouldn't put it like that. I'm not really in the business of being rescued, but he kept the situation from escalating."

“Of course. Forgive me.” His tone gentled and Jordan found herself questioning how easily the man shifted his emotions. “In any case, I’m glad you’re alright. I’d hate to see such an uncharacteristic blemish on our town chase you away.”

“I’m not planning on going anywhere,” Jordan assured him. It wasn’t quite the truth. If she had any sense, she’d be on her way to Boston already, but Cold Creek had a charm she didn’t want to name. Mostly because she had a bad feeling that name was Darren. St. Clair.

“That’s good to hear.” He looked down at the groceries in her basket. “If you’d like some company, I could carry those home for you.”

Jordan blinked. What was with the men in this town? Anyone who thought chivalry was dead hadn’t been to Cold Creek. It was charming in a vaguely creepy way. Then again, so was Chase. “Don’t you have your own stuff to carry?”

“I drove, and it’ll keep fine in the car.”

“Well…sure.” Turning him down seemed unnecessarily rude and she was admittedly curious about the man who cut such a controversial figure. Back when she’d had nothing but disdain for Darren, that controversy had seemed like a point in his favor, but now…

After going through the checkout, Jordan followed Chase outside and squinted at the sunlight. She did a double take just to make sure the man didn’t hiss and shrink away. If he *was* a vampire, that would certainly explain a lot.

“Lovely day, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.” *Okay, so not a vampire.* Pod person was still definitely on the table, though. “So, can I ask what the appeal of Cold Creek is if New York is an option?”

This time, his smile struck Jordan as rueful. “Let’s just say this town sinks its claws into you. I’m sure you’ll see what I mean.”

“I thought it would be a shame if I left.”

He glanced down at her, chuckling as he placed his groceries in a shiny red sports car with the top down and reached for hers. “You could say I have two minds on the subject.”

Jordan got the feeling he had two minds period, but she smiled politely and let him take her things. “Thanks. And I guess I know the feeling. As glad as I was to get away from my hometown, there’s part of me that still misses the area.”

“Home is a funny thing, isn’t it?” he asked in a wistful tone. “It shapes you, for better or for worse, but no matter how far you are, it never really leaves you.”

“That’s true,” Jordan murmured, watching him closely. “Do you have family in the area?”

“Yes,” he said, shifting back into a pleasant tone, much to Jordan’s relief. “My parents don’t live too far away, and I’ve got a couple of aunts and uncles around.”

“That’s nice. It seems like a pretty close knit community.”

“Oh, it certainly is that. I imagine you’ve already met the Danbridges who’ve infiltrated every level of local government.”

Jordan laughed, but she got the feeling he was only half-kidding. “I’ve noticed. I guess with Henry being the mayor it makes sense.”

“Oh, it goes back further than that. Being the mayor is practically a family legacy,” he said wryly. “He and Cindy didn’t have any children of their own, so I’m sure one of the nephews is next in line.”

“Can’t really picture Max as mayor,” Jordan admitted. Drag racing and politics didn’t exactly mix.

“No,” Chase mused. “He’s of a different breed, that’s for certain.”

“What does that mean?” Jordan asked. Everything Chase said seemed to have a double meaning.

“Nothing. Don’t listen to me, I’m just another brand of cynic,” he said with a glimmer in his eyes as they stopped in front of the house. Jordan was worried he’d end up inviting himself in, and while she was enjoying the walk more than she’d imagined, she had work to catch up on and whether she liked it or not, Darren’s suspicion was rubbing off on her. To her relief, he handed the groceries back. “It was lovely to see you again, Jordan. It’s a rare person who can make a sunny afternoon even brighter.”

Jordan couldn’t help but smile. He was so cheesy she felt her cholesterol spike, but he was so unapologetic about it that it came off as sincere. “Same to you, Chase. It was nice seeing you again.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” he called, watching from the curb as she went into the house. Jordan watched him leave, shaking her head. Maybe he wasn’t a stranger anymore, but Chase Wilde certainly was strange.

Mrs. Herrin’s door opened and the woman peered out with narrowed eyes. “Is that fruitcake gone?”

“Mrs. Herrin!”

The older woman gave the air a dismissive swat. “I’m telling you, that whole family gives me the creeps.”

“Why?” Jordan asked. “Everyone seems quick to talk about how much they dislike him, but no one ever comes out and says why.”

Julia huffed. “That’s because no one’s in a hurry to get sued. Just mind yourself around that one.” She gave Jordan a disapproving once over. “I’d think you had your hands full with Darren.”

Jordan groaned. “Darren and I are just friends, Mrs. Herrin.”

“Mhm,” the landlady said, smacking her lips in disbelief before she popped back into her apartment. “Heard that one before.”

Jordan rolled her eyes and carried her groceries up the stairs. She couldn’t shake the wariness her landlady’s comments had instilled in her, though. Not one but three people had separately warned her about Chase now, and the only thing Darren, Julia and Max seemed to have in common was their disdain for the mild-mannered attorney. It wasn’t the likelihood of him being dangerous that shook her. Jordan knew better than anyone that the most sinister monsters masqueraded as beings of light, but could her own instincts really be that far off?

Sure, Chase was strange, but he didn’t set off any of the red flags she’d learned to feel for over the years. She couldn’t quite place her finger on it, but there was something about him that felt familiar. Usually, that would have been all the more reason to be wary of him, but he felt safe in the same strange way Darren did. A way that she couldn’t explain anymore than she could shake it.

Jordan put her groceries away and got started on the next batch of tinctures and salves she had to send out, deciding to focus on more practical things. In time, hopefully the incident with Hank would blow over. If Cold Creek had anything going for it, it was the fact that it held secrets that seemed far more interesting than anything Jordan feared would be dredged up from her past.

# TEN

BY THE TIME the second evening of Darren's night watch came around, all of Jordan's surviving plants had been lovingly replanted and placed on the floor of the balcony. She leaned on the railing and pulled a blanket around her shoulders as the cool night air left her feeling chilly in her pajamas and wet hair. A dark truck pulled into the gravel lot, the first vehicle besides her own that she had seen make the trek down the little country road that led to the house. It was a nice if modest pickup and it came to a stop in the lot next to her car. A moment later, Darren got out.

Jordan leaned further over the balcony, watching him. He carried himself the exact same way even when he didn't think anyone was around. There was always a serious look on his face, always purpose in his step.

"Are the atheists sending people door to door now?" she called.

Darren looked up, momentarily startled before his serious expression split into a grin. "Just here for my shift."

She smiled down at him. "I opened your care package."

"Oh yeah?" He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back to look up at her. "So, what'd you think?"

"It was... unique," she said. "Chicken soup, tomato juice, aspirin and an old mix tape of Handel?"

"Vivaldi gets all the credit, but if you ask me, Handel is the Baroque composer of choice for hangovers," Darren said with a dramatic flourish of his hand.

Jordan laughed. "Care for some company?"

Darren pretended to consider it for a moment, scratching the scruff that had formed on his chin since she had last seen him. "I had planned on

catching up on my needlepoint, but I guess company would be okay."

Jordan rolled her eyes before heading down the fire escape. She jolted a little when strong hands grabbed her soft waist to help her down the small gap between the stairs and the floor.

"You've got your own private entrance, I see."

"I use it when I don't want to wake Mrs. Herrin," she replied, turning to face him only to realize they were a bit too close. She stepped back and felt a blush creep its way into her cheeks. It happened a bit too often for her liking when Darren was around. Hopefully the moon wasn't bright enough for him to notice or he might get the wrong idea.

"Your landlady has taken a liking to you," he said. "She really read me the riot act the other night."

"Sorry about that," Jordan mumbled, letting him in through the porch door. They settled in around the pillow and knitted blankets Mrs. Herrin had left for him on the porch swing. "So, are you really planning on spending the night out here again? Nothing happened last night."

He shrugged. "I'll still feel better if I do."

So would Jordan, but she decided not to admit it. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept as well as she had the night before, knowing he was just downstairs. "Well, that's nice of you. I really think it was just an animal, though."

"Hope so." He clearly didn't think so, but he didn't argue. The silence that fell between them gave way to the crickets and the faint sound of the creek flowing not far into the forest.

“Chase Wilde announced your engagement the other day," he said, breaking the silence.

"What?" Jordan asked, whipping her head around so fast she felt something pop in her neck.

Darren laughed. "Okay, so that was a little hyperbolic, but your reaction was priceless."

"Not funny," she grumbled, pulling her thin blanket tighter around her.

Darren unfolded one of the knitted quilts and draped it over her shoulders. "Sorry. Just thought you should know he has his eyes set on you."

"Well, he can set them elsewhere," she said with a sigh. "I'm not looking for a boyfriend or anything else."

"You'd probably be the first woman in Cold Creek to turn him down, despite his reputation," he admitted. "I haven't seen him take a real interest in anyone since high school."

"As flattered as I am, I'd have to decline all the same."

"He's not your type?"

She hesitated. "It's not that. I'm not even sure I have a type."

"Then what? If you don't mind me asking," he added quickly.

Jordan shrugged. "Even if I was interested, I'm not sure if I'd be good at the whole relationship thing."

"Not sure?" He cocked an eyebrow. "I'm sure you had your pick of the guys back in Arkansas." He hesitated. "Or the girls…?"

Jordan shook her head with a small smile. "I was pretty sheltered. Dating wasn't an option back home."

Darren frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"My parents were…conservative, to put it conservatively. I've got way too much baggage to even think about a relationship," she said, deciding that the safest course of action was to change the subject.

"Right. From your mysterious past."

Jordan waited for him to ask the question that had to be on his mind. When he didn't, she said, "You must be curious."

"Of course I am."

"Then why haven't you pressed the issue? You certainly could have taken the opportunity to interrogate me while I was drunk and I know you're not above digging into people's pasts."

He shrugged. "That was before I got to know you. I figure if your past was bad enough to have it sealed away under court order, the least I can do is respect your privacy."

Jordan let his words sink in for a moment. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he said, falling silent once again. Time spent in silence with Darren passed more swiftly than a day full of people and distractions. As the hour grew later, the night grew louder and Jordan found herself leaning back against the porch swing, only vaguely aware of the vet's arm draped behind her.

"Jordan?"

His voice made her jolt. "Yeah?"

"You were starting to nod off," he said. "Just thought you might want to go upstairs before it gets too late."

"Oh, thanks," she murmured. "I probably should get to bed. I'm meeting Cindy tomorrow for brunch."

He groaned. "Have fun."

"You're not her biggest fan, are you?"

"It's not that. I like Cindy, it's just that she's been hounding me to run for the damn town council for years. Her sister's already on it, so I think she's just trying to build an army."

"Why don't you join? It seems like a good way to help the town and you're all about that."

"Bureaucracy isn't really my thing. I'd rather expend my efforts on more practical things."

"Well, if you ever do decide to run, you'll have my vote," she said, unaware that she had leaned in.

"I've always admired a woman who takes her civic duty seriously," he teased, pausing as if to say something else. Instead of the words she was expecting, his lips claimed hers. The touch was surprisingly warm and gentle, but even more surprising to Jordan than the fact that he had kissed her was the fact that she had returned it.

Once she realized what was happening, Jordan gasped softly and pulled away. Darren looked away quickly. "Sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

"No, I --" Jordan stood quickly, clutching her blanket to her chest. "I really should get to bed."

"Yeah," said Darren, sullen once more. "Goodnight, Jordan."

"Goodnight, Darren," she said, letting the screen door fall shut behind her as she scurried up the stairs. It wasn't until she made it back to her empty apartment and curled up in bed, her heart fluttering wildly, that she took the time to process what had happened.

She covered her mouth and a ragged breath passed through her fingertips. A kiss. Her first one. It wasn't the way she had always pictured it would be, but now she couldn't imagine it any other way--or with anyone else.

# ELEVEN

"THERE YOU ARE," said Cindy, standing to hug Jordan as she entered the coffee shop. "I was worried you wouldn't make it."

"Sorry I'm late," Jordan said, smoothing her skirt out before she sat down. "It was a late night."

"Lots of plants to tend to?"

"You could say that," Jordan sighed. "Are the cappuccinos here any good?

"The ones I've tried are," said Cindy. "The iced coffee and carrot cake are to die for, though."

"Sounds great," said Jordan. She followed Cindy's recommendation on what to order once the waitress arrived and used the spare seconds to rehearse her apology one last time. "Cindy, I just wanted to say I'm really sorry for walking out on your party like that."

Cindy waved her off, unfolding a napkin in her lap. “Max told me what happened and Darren filled in the rest, so I don't blame you. Honestly, I'm ashamed of the way folks are acting around here. You'd think they'd never heard of a little hoodoo before."

Jordan blinked. "You don't think it's strange?"

"Oh, please, my great grandmother was always throwing salt over her shoulder and fixing up hex bags whenever we had troubles," she said, taking a sip of her newly arrived coffee. "Then there's Henry’s side of the family." She rolled her eyes. "Can't say I put much stock in any of it, but it's nothing to get all bent out of shape over."

Jordan breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad. I was worried I'd have to move again," she admitted.

"Don't be silly, Cold Creek is a safe haven to anyone who needs it," she said firmly. “Henry and I see to that. As for Darren St. Clair, you'll have to forgive him. He's a good man, he's just got a fatal case of taking himself too seriously."

"He does seem to take his work seriously, but we’ve made our peace,“ Jordan assured her. "He also seems to care a lot about this town.“

"Oh, he does. He's just like his father in that regard."

"His father?" Jordan asked, curiosity overtaking her reluctance to pry. "He was the town doctor, wasn't he?"

"And a damn good one at that," said Cindy. "Liam and Natalie St. Clair were two of the finest people to walk this earth." Her gaze became distant, looking far past the printed sign on the window. "It's a real shame about the accident. It happened fifteen years to the day you had your encounter with him in the diner. I suppose it's no wonder he exploded on you. He always gets a bit broody this time of year."

"Can I ask what happened?" Jordan asked, figuring it wasn't really an invasion of privacy if it was something that was so widely known. "Did it have anything to do with the factory?"

Cindy sighed. "I see you've already been filled in on our illustrious history. No, fortunately it had nothing to do with that. I say fortunately because there wasn't a sanctimonious bone in Liam's body. Darren doesn't take after his father in that regard," she added with a snort. "Liam never would have wanted to live to see his warnings about the factory come true. He and Natalie were on their way out of town to visit her sister and they were killed by a drunk driver along the way. Darren was away at college by that point, but sometimes I think he feels like he should have been in the car with them."

"Why?" Jordan asked, horrified.

"Because he and his father had gotten into a huge fight after his last visit home," she replied. "Darren went back early. I think he's always blamed himself in some way."

"His parents don't sound like the kind of people who would have wanted that."

"What parent would?" asked Cindy. Jordan could think of one or two, but kept it to herself.

"He's been staying over at the house," Jordan admitted, deciding a subject change was in order. "Someone or something knocked over the

plants on my balcony and Mrs. Herrin thought we'd feel safer if someone kept watch."

"Oh?" Cindy asked, raising her eyebrows. "How did Darren come to be the designated watchman?"

"We talked after the party," she said, deciding not to fill Cindy in on Hank's actions. She had enough on her plate. "He apologized for the diner thing and we ended up talking all night."

When Cindy's face lit up with a triumphant expression, Jordan realized divulging that particular detail had been a mistake. "Well, well, well," she said in a satisfied tone. "Looks like my matchmaking efforts weren't a total bust after all."

"It's really not like that," Jordan insisted. Now she definitely wasn't telling Cindy about the kiss. "He's just different than I thought he was."

"That's what made me fall in love with Henry," she said matter-of-factly. "He was different from all the other men in town. And mysterious. Kind of like Darren."

"Darren has his charms," Jordan admitted. "Whoever he does end up with is a lucky woman."

"And why not you?" she pressed. "He has a good job, he's good with children and he's about the furthest thing away from a womanizer you can get without--well, you know."

Jordan laughed. "You sound like you're selling a car."

"Honey, a car is a much easier sell than a man," Cindy scoffed. "At least with a car you can take it into a shop and have someone bang on it with a wrench until it starts working properly. You do that to a man and the police end up involved."

Jordan snickered. "Well, you do have a mechanic in the family." She paused. “Come to think of it, why haven’t you tried to pair me up with Max?”

“I wish I could say it’s because he has a girlfriend, but the truth is, that’s never a permanent obstacle,” Cindy sighed. “I love that boy like my own son, but there has to be at least one woman in this town he hasn’t slept with. Trust me, that’s a fast lane to heartbreak.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Jordan said, surprised at Cindy’s candor regarding her own kin. Then again, it didn’t come as any great shock that Max was a womanizer with those golden eyes…

“Oh, before I forget." Cindy picked up her purse and dug through it until she produced a colorful flier. A full moon served as the backdrop for a stock image festival and the entire flier was overlaid with the words "Autumn Equinox Festival."

"It's September twenty-third," said Cindy. "It's our annual excuse to fry corn with ungodly amounts of butter, throw beanbags into holes and sell overpriced drinks to benefit the town medical fund. This is your official invitation, and also my official plea for you to join my volunteer team."

"You want me to help?" Jordan asked, surprised.

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, isn't it bad publicity? In light of the Stu Herbert thing, I mean."

"Oh, it's just a kitschy little Fall festival. Besides, all of that sort of fits in with what I need you to do."

"How?" Jordan asked, growing concerned. If Cindy was just another person in line to use her magic, that would explain why she was so unexpectedly tolerant.

Cindy's phone buzzed and she glanced down at it. "Oh, shoot. I have to take this, it's one of the festival vendors,” she said, standing to gather her things. "You have to do all this nonsense months in advance. I'll call you later, we'll set up a time to discuss the details."

"But--"

"See you!" Cindy called, already halfway out the door before Jordan could process what had just happened. She was fairly sure she was not only attending but somehow involved in the festival. The greater mystery was how Darren had managed to resist Cindy's attempts to get him to run for council for so long. The woman was like a dog with a bone.

# TWELVE

THE NEXT FEW nights passed in relatively uneventful silence. There were no broken pots and no more incidents of harassment on the street. News of Stu Herbert's recovery had simmered down and the town gossip had mercifully turned to other topics. Jordan still didn't know what she was going to do at the festival, but she had a feeling Cindy would be in touch before long.

As she made her way back from the grocery store well past dark, she felt like a fool for being so relieved that Darren's car was missing from the driveway. She had been shamelessly avoiding him all week and she felt a mixture of relief and disappointment at the thought that the night before marked the last of Darren's faithful watch. She couldn't deny the fact that she felt safer knowing he was close, even if she didn't know how to approach him after their kiss.

"Need some help with those?" Darren's voice came from the side of the house where he was leaning, holding a cigarette in one hand. His unexpected appearance made her jump. "I know you've been avoiding me, but was the kiss really that bad?"

"I just wasn't expecting you," she said, catching her breath. "Your car isn't in the driveway."

"It's not exactly a hike," he said, taking a drag off his cigarette. He blew the smoke out in a smooth stream just like she'd seen James Dean do once in a movie. "I can handle a little exercise."

"Not for long if you keep smoking those."

"We all have our vices. Just do me a favor and don't mention mine to Mrs. Herrin."

"Why not?" Jordan asked. "I've seen her smoking."

"Yeah, but she hasn't seen *me* smoking," he replied, crushing the withered end of his spent cigarette into the dirt. "She thinks I gave it up."

"Well, did you?"

He shrugged, coming down off the porch to take her bags. "Most days."

"What's so different about today?"

He paused and for a moment, Jordan thought he might kiss her again. This time, she wasn't at all sure she would have the strength to pull away.

"Where should I put these?" he asked, lifting the bags.

"Oh, right," she said, motioning for him to follow her into the house. As relieved as she was that the spell was broken, she wondered what the answer to her question might have been.

"I get to use the official entrance," he said, smirking. "I feel honored."

She laughed. "Mrs. Herrin always stays up late Tuesday nights to watch her shows, so there's no need to worry about waking her."

"Does she ask you to use the fire escape?"

"No, but I do if I think I'll disturb her," she admitted.

"That's considerate of you," he said, stopping outside her apartment door.

"Mrs. Herrin has been so kind to me, it's the least I can do," she said, taking out her keys.

"She's an acquired taste," he admitted, following her inside as she turned on the lights. "The thing is, once she cares about you there's nothing she wouldn't do for you."

"I've noticed that," Jordan said, clearing off a space on the counter. "You can just set them here. Sorry, the place is a bit of a mess."

Darren looked around the mostly neat apartment, save for a few potted plants on the counter and table. The holly had been fitted with a splint on one of its branches. "It looks like a plant hospital in here."

"It kind of is. Some of them didn't fare too well after the fall, but I couldn't bear to throw them away without at least giving them a chance."

"Don't you have some kind of cure-all for that?" he asked. She could tell he was just humoring her, but he put on a good show.

"Plants are delicate," she said, caressing the leaves of the holly. "Tinctures and medicine can only do so much. Even if you can physically keep them alive, that doesn't mean their soul is intact. Sometimes all you

can do is wrap the broken pieces and hope they find a way to knit themselves back together."

"Plants sound a lot like people," he said, coming to stand in front of her on the other side of the counter.

Jordan looked up at him and swallowed hard. Suddenly she understood then why she'd been trying so hard to avoid him. It wasn't that she was afraid of him but of the way he made her feel. "I've never thought we were so different from them," she admitted softly.

When Darren's hand pressed against her cheek, she let out a trembling sigh. "I'm sorry about the other night," he began. "I never meant to make you uncomfortable. I certainly didn't want you to feel like you had to tiptoe around me in your own home."

"Darren, that's not it," she said quickly. "When you kissed me, I wasn't sure what to make of it. I thought--well, I don't know what I thought. I guess I was just overwhelmed."

He frowned. "Don't tell me-- Jordan, that wasn't your first kiss, was it?"

Her face warmed at the incredulity in his tone. She wanted to lie but knew that her blush would only betray her if her poor deceptive skills missed the chance.

"Holy shit," he murmured, almost under his breath.

"You said it."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"What was there to say? It's humiliating to be my age and never have even kissed a guy."

"What? No, it's not. There's nothing wrong with it, I'm just sorry you wasted your first with me," he said in a sullen tone.

"It wasn't a waste," she insisted. "It was wonderful, actually. Like I said, I just got a little overwhelmed. I wasn't sure what to do when I ran into you next."

"And now that you've run into me?"

Jordan smiled, taking a step closer. "Now I know exactly what to do," she said, draping her arms around his neck. Darren was tall enough that she had to look up at him but not so tall that she couldn't reach his lips without standing on her toes. Before she could let her common sense get the best of her, and before the bewildered look on his face could turn into something else, she closed the distance between them and pressed her lips against his.

They were every bit as warm and wonderful as she remembered. Maybe even more so.

Once the shock wore off, Darren returned the kiss and his strong hands settled on her waist. She let out a surprised yelp when he lifted her onto the counter without breaking the kiss, but she opened her legs enough to allow his body to close the space between them.

His lips pressed gently against hers at first, but soon his tongue moved over them as if requesting entrance. Her lips parted instinctively to grant it and she found his taste sweet and smoky. Jordan had never been to a school dance or had a late-night makeout session in the back of a boy's car, but in that moment, she felt exactly like all those girls in the movies. The ones who let themselves get lured in by the good looks and smoky kisses of the black-leather-jacket-wearing, rebel-without-a-cause bad boy. It was in that moment that she understood, after years of yelling at "those girls" for being so naïve and careless, just why the bad boy always got the girl.

At some point during Darren's transformation from her worst fear to the high point of her day, Jordan had become one of "those girls."

Darren's hand ventured up past her waist and his fingertips casually brushed over her chest. He paused, as if giving her the chance to voice her opposition, but she had none to give. Even when his hand slipped underneath her shirt, all she could do was squeak in surprise.

He laughed softly in her ear, breaking the kiss in favor of sweeping his tongue along the side of her neck. He moved her hair over her shoulder and placed a series of gentle kisses from her jaw to her collarbone.

Jordan let out another trembling sigh, struggling to process what was happening. Her experience with men was limited strictly to the realm of fantasy. Even then, her sheltered upbringing had left her with nothing more than classic movies and literature to fuel her imagination. Experiencing the thrill of that first touch--especially at the hands of a man like Darren--was entirely different from imagining one.

"If it's too much, just say the word," he said, looking down at her with concern in his tone and lust in his gaze.

"No, it's fine. I like it."

Darren gave her that slightly off-center grin before lifting her into his arms again, this time placing her on the edge of the bed. Hooking his fingers underneath her sweater, he deftly slipped it over her head and tossed it aside. At first, the exposure made her feel almost vulnerable enough to

call it off, but the way his hands rubbed and caressed her flesh made her feel covered in an entirely new way. The ease with which he unhooked her bra and dispatched it made her keenly aware of her own inexperience.

Surely he noticed, but he didn't seem to mind. He pushed her back onto the bed, taking care to cradle her head as he did so. She had no sooner grown used to the patient caress of his tongue than it began to trail downward, past her ribcage and around her navel in a half-taunting, half-enticing ring. He nipped the tender flesh just below her stomach and she writhed in nervous anticipation as his fingers toyed at the button on her jeans. She instinctively moved her hand to cover her softly rounded stomach.

Darren looked up at her with curiosity dancing in his eyes. Jordan's face grew warm, and her only consolation as that she blushed so often around him that maybe he would just think it was her natural state. "Sorry," she whispered, "I guess I'm just a bit self-conscious."

"Don't apologize," he said, digging his fingertips into her plump waist as his gaze explored her. "I'm just not sure what there is to be self-conscious about."

Before Jordan could formulate a response, Darren pulled her zipper down slowly, exposing the blue cotton panties underneath. He upset the little bow on the front with an amused puff of air through his nose and began tugging her jeans past her hips.

Once she was naked save for her underwear, Darren paused to examine her closely. Jordan squirmed under his gaze, newly aware of every flaw on her body--every stretchmark and the few faint scars that had been put there by other hands. "My God, you're beautiful," he said, breathing the words she thought would be far more appropriate in reference to a piece of art than her body.

"You really don't get a lot of women here in Cold Creek, do you?" she teased.

He held her gaze without a hint of amusement. "None like you."

Jordan didn't know how to respond to that, either.

"I'm not going to do anything that'll hurt," he promised, looking her in the eyes with such gentle certainty that any hesitation she might have had was quelled. "Tonight is all about you."

At first, she didn't understand what he meant, but his actions were more of an answer than words could have provided. Her fingers worried at the

bedspread as he explored her with his mouth, rousing sensations she had never imagined were there. If she didn't know better, Jordan could have sworn he was deriving pleasure simply from giving it to her. It wasn't at all in keeping with what little she had been taught about sex, but his efforts were too dizzying to question it.

Jordan bit her lip as a sharp cry of bliss tore from her throat and her body convulsed. She covered her mouth in horror, hoping desperately that the television downstairs had been loud enough to mask the sound. Darren rose from his knees, a glazed look in his eyes and a lopsided grin of pride on his face as he stood.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, her hand clamped firmly over her mouth as she sat up and pressed her legs together. "I don't know what came over me."

"That's kind of the whole point," he said, chuckling as he climbed into bed next to her.

"That was supposed to happen?" she asked doubtfully.

"The orgasm? Absolutely," he said with confidence, leaning back against her headboard as he pulled her against his side. "The scream? If the guy knows what he's doing, yeah."

"Oh," she murmured, leaning into him if only to hide her hopelessly reddened face.

Darren pulled the throw at the end of the bed around them both. "I take it you enjoyed that."

She nodded sheepishly. "Let's just say if I already booked my ticket to Hell, I think they just bumped me up to first class."

He laughed. "Coming from a Pentecostal, I'll take that as a compliment."

She laid her head against his chest, gazing up at him. "Is there...anything else you'd like to do?"

"No," he said, cupping her cheek in his hand, "You get some rest and I'll take a cold shower."

She watched him in bewilderment, but before she could ask, he added, "I told you I wasn't going to do anything too serious tonight. You're a virgin and your first time should be special. Some things are worth taking slow."

Jordan bit her lip and snuggled closer. "You're full of surprises, Darren St. Clair."

"That makes two of us, whoever you are," he teased lightly, pressing his lips against hers. Jordan melted into the kiss, then into his embrace. She didn't know how long he held her like that before she finally drifted off, only that it was the first time she could truly remember feeling safe.

# THIRTEEN

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Jordan had settled nicely into small town life. Even easier had been the transition to being the doctor's girlfriend. Maybe it was because the town gossips had moved on to other topics, the distraction provided by the festival, or even because of the fact that she belonged to Darren, but Jordan now received only few stray looks from Cold Creek's more curious residents when she went out. Even those began to die down.

Most importantly, there were no more vandalism attempts or strange phone calls. As the full moon rose overhead, Jordan was relieved that Darren had called her over to his apartment that night. He wouldn't say what it was on the phone. Some sort of surprise. She was just glad for the excuse not to be alone. She doubted Hermes would try anything in front of an audience even if he was prowling around in human form.

The light in the clinic was still on, which meant that Darren was likely still with a patient. Jordan had the feeling his surprise was that he was going to make dinner--a labor of love if his barren refrigerator was any indication--so she decided to stop at the bakery for dessert. Apparently, half the town had the same idea, because a line had formed that was wrapped around the door. Someone called her name across the sit-in area of the shop and Jordan looked over to see Chase Wilde waving eagerly.

Pretending she hadn't seen him wasn't an option, so she took a deep breath, put on her best smile and hoped that Darren had been exaggerating about the lawyer's infatuation with her. He stood to greet her and took her hand in his with a warm squeeze.

"It's good to see you again, Jordan."

“Likewise,” she said politely. She realized after their last encounter that he hadn’t been kidding about making his presence scarce in town. Amid the vague rumors and generally dismissive way people spoke of him, it was easy to forget how charming Chase was in person.

He stopped to pull out a chair for her. “Why don't you have a seat and chat for a minute while the line thins out?"

Jordan glanced back at the intimidating queue that didn't seem to be growing. He was right. She would probably get out of the shop at the same time whether she spent the wait standing in line or talking to him.

"As long as I'm not disturbing you," she said, sitting across from him at the small table. There was a box full of sugary pastries in front of him, and they seemed to be arranged by color.

"The company of a beautiful woman could hardly be called a disturbance," he said with such sincerity that it was hard to consider it a pickup line. Before Jordan could formulate a response, he continued, "I hear you're dating the town dog whisperer."

She blinked in surprise. He laughed. "Forgive my bluntness, I've been at trial all week and my filter has grown weak from disuse." He slid the box towards her. "Danish?"

"It's fine," she said with a nervous laugh. "And no thanks. I’m about to have dinner. I’m picking up dessert for later.”

"I have a bit of a sweet tooth," he said with resigned self-loathing before taking a bite of one of the pastries. He scowled at the flaky crumbs that fell onto his lap and swept them off. "You'd think they would have found a way to make these neater by now." Then he noticed her watching him and tilted his head. "Did I say something?"

"No, I'm just having a hard time coming to terms with the image of someone like you having a weakness for pastries," she admitted, unable to keep from smiling.

"Someone like me?" he asked, his light brows knitting in confusion.

"You know, someone so elegant and professional," she explained quickly. "I didn't mean it in a bad way."

He chuckled. "No, that's probably the nicest thing anyone in this town has ever said about me."

"That can't be true."

"Oh, it is. They all shake my hand and smile to my face, but I know the things they say behind my back." The most disturbing thing to Jordan was

the fact that he said it all in such a pleasant, casual tone. "It's alright, though. I can hardly blame them."

"Why?" Jordan asked nervously.

His blue eyes twinkled with mischief. "Let's just say I was a different person in high school."

"Even if that's true, it's hardly fair to hold you accountable for what you did back then," she said carefully.

“A small town never forgets."

Jordan gulped. When she saw that the line was being cleared, she stood. "Well, it was nice seeing you again, Chase.”

"My pleasure, as always," he said, smiling. "Enjoy your evening and tell Darren I said hello."

"I will," she said, deciding not to ask how two meetings constituted "always." She made it to the counter, ordered a few assorted desserts she thought Darren might like and left the little shop. She walked quickly to Darren's apartment and glanced at the clock on the administration building to see that she had gone from being much too early to being ten minutes late.

The lights above the clinic were on, so Jordan walked up the stairs and knocked on the apartment door. She could hear someone moving around inside, but he didn't answer right away.

"Just a minute," Darren called from inside, sounding uncharacteristically frazzled. A moment later, he opened the door and Jordan's nostrils filled with smoke and the smell of burnt Italian food.

"I uh, tried to cook," said Darren, wiping his flour-covered hands on a dish rag. "I had a last-minute walk-in, and I thought it would be fine to leave it in the oven for a second. Guess I'm better at making breakfast."

Jordan tried not to laugh as she stepped inside. "I'm surprised the smoke detector isn't going off," she said, looking around at all the smoke the open window and fan were doing little to help with.

"That's because I took out the batteries after I threw it across the room," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "Don't tell the fire marshal."

Jordan laughed, unable to resist the temptation anymore.

"Glad you find my culinary ineptitude so funny," he said dryly, shutting the door behind her.

"It's just that you remind me so much of the bachelor archetype in those old movies," she said, setting her purse down.

"Oh yeah?" he challenged, crossing his arms. "How's that?"

"Well," she began carefully, "He can't cook, he's a bit messy, and he always seems cold and grumpy on the surface."

He stepped closer. "Go on."

She reached out and trailed a finger down the crisp line of buttons on his shirt. "But underneath, he always surprises you because he's really quite a gentleman."

Darren's amusement faded into a new look she didn't recognize as he cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You know, you remind me of one of those movie girls, too."

"How's that?"

"Everything," he said. “From the way you speak to the things that startle you, even the way you dress. Sometimes I'd swear you stepped out of a time capsule from the ‘50s."

She laughed nervously. "Yeah. I really should get out more."

"So," he said, letting his hand fall away. "Either I can take you out or we can order something and watch a movie."

"A movie here sounds great." She took a seat on his couch, noting that there was no more errant laundry to be found.

"What kind of pizza do you want?" he asked, picking up the phone.

"Anything but meat."

"Right," said Darren, waiting until someone picked up before ordering a veggie and whatever a "meat storm" was. When he hung up, he flopped down on the couch and motioned for her to sit beside him. "Dinner, take two will be here in twenty."

Jordan settled in at his side and for a while they simply cuddled in silence. As always, her anxiety seemed to melt away at first contact with Darren. She had never met someone who put her at ease the way he did, in spite of their rough start. She had never met someone who could get her riled up the way he could, either.

"Is that all you brought?" he asked, nodding to her small bag.

"Oh, well, yeah. I didn't know if I'd be staying over or if bringing a bigger bag would be weird," she admitted. "It's got everything I need, though."

"I can always swing by your apartment," he said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. Even though it still hurt, it dissolved the stiffness in her joint. "You're really tense. I should give you a massage after dinner."

"That sounds nice." What she didn't admit was that she was tense because she was afraid the white cat would be paying her another visit now that the moon was full.

"I see you brought dessert," he said, picking up the box of pastries.

"Yeah, I saw that you were still in the clinic so I figured I had time," she said. "I ran into Chase Wilde. He asked me to sit with him for a bit and he mentioned that he knows we're dating."

"I'm sure he was congratulatory," Darren said wryly.

She hesitated. "No, but he didn't say anything negative. I got the feeling he was just lonely and looking for someone to talk to."

"Oh, I'm sure."

"Really," she insisted. "What is it that's so bad about Chase, anyway?"

He sighed and seemed to be at least considering giving her an answer when there was a sharp knock on the door. Darren bolted to the door, and Jordan couldn't help but feel like his haste was more about changing the subject than hunger. A moment later, he placed two boxes of piping hot pizza on the coffee table.

"I'm not going to get an answer, am I?" she asked, leaning forward.

“Chase’s past isn't exactly a date night topic," he said, handing her a plate before he took his own.

"If I'm going to avoid someone like you seem to want me to, I at least need to know why," she said, feeling only a hint of guilt for the manipulation.

He groaned. "Fine. I've known Chase my entire life and it seemed like he found a new way to be more of an asshole with each year that passed. He was always that kid mouthing off to his parents, tormenting some poor freshman for not having the right shoes, just general spoiled rich kid bullshit. I'm pretty damn sure he was the reason behind a bunch of neighborhood cats that went missing when we were teenagers, but I could never prove it. When we got to high school, he kind of mellowed out. At least, that's what we all thought."

Jordan's stomach churned. Even after being stalked by one, the idea of anyone hurting a cat made her feel ill. Now she knew why Darren hadn't wanted to discuss it over dinner and wished she had listened, but it was too late.

Darren paused to crack open a can of beer and took a long gulp. "There was a rumor about one of the girls he dated. She disappeared and her

parents accused Chase of having something to do with it, but they never had proof and it fizzled out eventually. I always figured his parents paid them off one way or another. The police never even found her body.”

"You really think he killed his girlfriend?” Jordan asked, unable to hide her shock. As little as she knew of Chase, it was impossible to imagine a man who blanched at the sight of blood and had a fondness for pastries doing something so ruthless.

He shrugged. "The police couldn't find enough evidence to press charges, so it's not my place to say. Other folks in town don't feel the same way."

"But he's so..."

"Pleasant? I know. He's been like that ever since they dropped the investigation," Darren replied, helping himself to a third slice of pizza. "Maybe he is innocent and it scared him straight. Who really knows? Honestly, he creeps me out now more now than he did before. At least you knew what you were getting with the old Chase.”

"Thanks for telling me," she murmured.

"Did it have any effect?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Are you trying to ask me to stay away from him?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying *not* to ask," he said. "Especially at the risk of seeming like one of those possessive, misogynistic rednecks you're probably used to."

"But you *are* asking."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'm asking."

"That's all you had to do," she said, snuggling into his side.

“That easy?” he asked doubtfully.

Jordan shrugged. “I’m not in the habit of letting people tell me what to do, but I care about you and if it’s that important to you, I’ll trust your gut. Now, how about that movie?"

"Sure," he said, clearly relieved. "We could rent something off my movie channels."

“Sounds good to me.”

"Your pick."

Jordan stared at the remote and its dizzying array of buttons. No matter how long she’d had to play catchup with the modern world after her Puritanical upbringing, it would never cease to overwhelm her just how

complicated entertainment technology had become. She surfed through the channel list until she found something she recognized.

"Oh, this is one of my favorites," she said, settling in with a piece of pizza.

"*Rear Window*?" Darren asked, squinting at the description before she put it on. "That's Hitchcock, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she replied. "It's kind of creepy."

His lip twitched. "I think I'll be alright. You sure you don't mind watching it again?"

"No, all the best movies get better with time," she said, moving closer when Darren's arm draped over her shoulder. He made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a snort, which Jordan decided was one of the most charming things a man could do.

As the movie began, they continued eating. While the story usually captivated her, Jordan found herself far more riveted by the steady rhythm of Darren's heartbeat next to her ear. Her anxiety faded as she snuggled up to his side with his strong arm wrapped around her, absently stroking her side. She had grown less nervous about him touching her stomach, but his touch still sparked a bit of self-consciousness.

Before the second half of the movie was over, Darren's steady breathing clued her in to the fact that he had fallen asleep, and before long so had she.

# FOURTEEN

THE FULL MOON came and went without incident, much to Jordan's relief. The fitting for the costume Cindy wanted her to wear for the equinox festival hadn't taken as long as she had thought, so she dialed Darren's number on the cell phone he had talked her into getting. Without going into more of her past than she cared to divulge at this fragile juncture in their relationship, she couldn’t come up with a decent excuse for not joining everyone else in the 21st century.

Sure, it was safer for most people to carry a phone around at all times, but the constant fear that her father would somehow track her down made the idea of being off the grid incredibly appealing. Still, she had finally given in after coming to terms with the fact that if she truly wanted to start over, that meant living like a normal person, privacy-erasing technology and all. She had, however, refused to get a smartphone model in favor of a much more manageable flip phone.

The phone stopped ringing and a pre-recorded message picked up. Jordan waited for the sound of the beep only to receive a message telling her Darren's mailbox was full.

She sighed and slipped her phone back into her pocket. She hung her newly tailored costume in the closet and set about choosing an outfit for the evening. She settled on one of the shorter skirts she had picked out in town along with a fitted top and sweater. Her mother's voice rang shrilly in her mind as she examined her own reflection.

*"Alyssa June Hurlow, you will not go up on that stage looking like a harlot,"* had been her exact words when Jordan had tried to get away with wearing blush to a tent revival service when she was eleven.

*"But Mama,"* Jordan had protested. *"Daisy wears it, too."*

*"The Good Lord'll strike Daisy Ford down before he uses her in the ministry like he uses you every night,"* her mother had replied with no small amount of pride. *"Now, you go wash up and toss those paints in the trash while you're at it. And put on a shirt that don't make you look like a trussed-up pig. Your father wants to see you before the service starts."*

Jordan shook her head in an attempt to chase the memory away. It had always seemed strange that sometimes she could hardly remember her past, and others the memories flowed freely, usually when she wanted them the least.

The phone rang, a welcome distraction. "Hello?"

"It's Darren," he said in that cool, gravelly voice that could belong to no one else. "I saw you called a little while ago."

"Yeah, I tried to leave a message but your answering machine was full," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

His husky laugh made warmth surge in the pit of her stomach. "I always forget to empty it. You know, you could just text me."

“I could, but then I’d have to turn in my hipster card.”

He gave a dramatic sigh, but joking was usually enough to erase his suspicion whenever the quirks from her upbringing popped up. Surely he’d noticed the gaps in her knowledge of pop culture and other basic elements of modern life, and knowing that she’d grown up with fanatically religious parents couldn’t explain all of it. Sooner or later, she would have to admit that she’d been raised in a glorified cult, and that was the rosy part of her childhood, but for now, she just wanted to enjoy the only semblance of a normal life she’d ever had.

Despite what anyone said, normal was *so* underrated. It was heaven, and Jordan wasn’t ready to let it go any sooner than she had to. Even if it was a lie.

“Are we still on for tonight?” he asked.

“Sure are. I’m ready whenever you are."

"Great, I just finished up with my last patient. Give me about twenty minutes to get ready and I'll come pick you up."

"Are you sure? I could come to you."

"Nah, you're on the way out of town."

"Okay," she said, her heart skipping a beat in anticipation of visiting the city. It was their first official out of town date. Granted, Northampton wasn't

so much a city as a collection of town squares from what she had heard, but it was certainly more exciting than Cold Creek. "See you soon."

"See ya."

The minutes seemed to stretch into hours, but Darren's car pulled up right on time. Jordan ran down the stairs, stopping when she saw Mrs. Herrin peeking out of her apartment. "You tell that boy he'd better not lose you in the city."

Jordan laughed. "I'm sure we'll find our way back, Mrs. Herrin. What are your plans for the evening?"

"Just watching my shows," she said, pulling her robe closer around her slouched shoulders. "That damn Dr. Chelsea keeps sabotaging things with that nice internist and I've got half a mind to send the writers an email telling them to knock it off."

Jordan pursed her lips to keep from laughing. She had learned the hard way that Mrs. Herrin took the professional and romantic exploits of the beautiful and fiercely independent Dr. Chelsea very seriously. “Well, maybe they need to hear it."

Mrs. Herrin glanced back into the apartment as the sound of the intro music filtered out from her living room. "Gotta go, the opening credits are on. Have fun, dear."

"You too, Mrs. Herrin. Don't worry, I won't be in too late," she said, opening the front door just as Darren arrived on the step.

"Hi, Julia," he said, nodding to the older woman.

"Can't talk now," Mrs. Herrin said with a dismissive wave before disappearing into her apartment.

Darren stared at the door and looked offended. "What's with her?"

"Dr. Chelsea is on," Jordan said, following him out the door.

"Ah," he said with a knowing head tilt. "That broad is just too damn sexy and independent for Dr. Manley to handle."

Jordan giggled, slipping into his car after he opened the door. "I had no idea you were a fan."

"I'm not, but before you got here I was the one she roped into Friday night viewing parties," he said, pulling out of the driveway.

"Believe it or not, I enjoy them."

He cast a doubtful glance her way as they traveled down the dirt road that led through the forest. "You don't seem like the soap opera type."

"I'm not," she admitted. "It's a bit risqué for my taste, but I like spending time with Mrs. Herrin. She's good company."

"She is," he agreed, turning down a road that made Jordan realize just how isolated Cold Creek was, surrounded by miles of nothing but forest on all sides. "When my parents died, she let me stay with her when I was home from college so I wouldn't have to be alone in the house. She gave me the apartment you're in, actually."

It took a moment for Jordan to recover from the shock that Darren was speaking so openly about his parents. "Really? That was kind of her."

"Yeah. Suffice it to say I owe her more than a weekly soap watching session."

"I'm sorry about your parents," she murmured, wondering if she should admit that she already knew they were gone. "Cindy said they were indispensable to the town."

"They were," he said, clearing his throat. "My mother especially. My father was the town doctor, but my mother was everything to everyone. Nurse, therapist, guardian angel. Hell, she even changed a few tires on the side of the road," he said with a fond laugh.

"She sounds amazing."

"She was," he said, glancing over at her. "She really would've liked you."

Jordan looked down at her hands. "That's a pretty big compliment."

"No, really," he insisted, turning onto the highway. "She was sort of a lapsed Catholic. She was into all that spiritual stuff, and it didn't matter if it came from Jesus, Buddha or the Dalai Lama himself."

"Really?" she asked, unable to hide her surprise.

"What you really want to ask is, 'How did someone like that raise such a crunchy atheist?'"

"Well," she said sheepishly, "I wouldn't put it quite like that."

"It's a valid question. Honestly, I guess her faith is part of the reason I lost mine, if I ever had it to begin with. The fact that someone like my mother, someone who had so much faith in the Higher Good and devoted her life to helping people, could just get blown away by some asshole who thought he could drive himself home from the bar kind of soured me on the idea of a benevolent universe. Even if there is a God, which I doubt, believing in him doesn't seem to count for much."

Jordan listened in silence, her heart aching for the man who was both a practical stranger and the closest friend she had ever known. "I'm so sorry, Darren." She knew the words weren't enough, but at the same time she couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't diminish his pain.

He shrugged. "I try not to judge anyone else for their beliefs, but between my mother and my father, I'd say my dad had it right. He didn't expect anything from the world and at least I know he wasn't surprised by what he got in the end."

Jordan didn't know how to respond to that, either. Before she had the chance, he added, "Sorry, didn't mean to be such a downer."

"You're not," she murmured. "I'm just glad you felt like you could share that with me."

"You're easy to talk to."

The lights of the city came into view and Jordan leaned towards the window to get a better look. "It's beautiful."

He snorted. "It's Northampton, but I'm not sure I'd call it beautiful. I’m sure it’s like any other small city.”

"I lived in one briefly but I grew up in the country," she admitted. "My parents thought it was better to live in a rural setting."

"Ah. Avoiding the temptations of the big city," he said dryly.

"Something like that," she said, leaning to watch the buildings as they passed. There were restaurants and bars with brightly lit signs, apartment buildings as tall as they were narrow all lined up in a row, and people moving around shielded by big black umbrellas. The lightly falling rain made all the lights glisten off the pavement, casting a surreal glow on the bustling little city.

Darren pulled into the theater parking lot and came around for her door, holding an umbrella that was more than big enough for the both of them. "Hope you don't mind if we eat after the movie. It's a pretty limited showing."

"I don't mind at all," she said, trying to contain her excitement as they headed towards the theater. "What are we seeing?"

"It's an old movie, but I think you'll like it," he said cryptically, leading her towards a glass booth in front of the theater. He took out his phone and flashed what looked like a barcode on the screen to the boy behind the booth. The ticket salesman scanned his phone and it beeped just like the

grocery store register. Jordan's eyes widened as Darren ushered her into the theater so the next person could take their place in line.

"But we didn't pay," she said, confused.

He laughed. "I bought the tickets earlier with an app. One of the many wonderful things you can do when your phone has a screen instead of buttons."

She wrinkled her nose distastefully. “I like my buttons.”

"Wait here and I'll get us some snacks," he said. "What do you like?"

"Whatever you want, I'm not picky.”

He gave her a strange look. "Don't tell me you don't have a favorite snack at the movies."

She looked at him blankly and the warmth in her cheeks betrayed her answer.

Darren frowned. "Wait. Jordan, have you ever been to the movies?"

"Well, my parents--"

"Not wholesome enough," he muttered. "Right. Okay, wait here and I'm gonna fix this travesty," he said, walking over to the refreshment counter before she could argue. A few minutes later, he came back with a giant tub of popcorn, a tray of soda and a bag full of candy boxes.

Jordan's eyes widened, rushing to take the soda from him. "What did you do, buy everything they had?"

"Hey, you won't know what you like until you try everything," he said, leading her down the hall towards the theater. "Quite frankly, as a red-blooded American citizen I simply can't date anyone who hasn't indulged in the pastime of stuffing your face with overpriced movie candy and stale popcorn. It's downright unpatriotic."

She giggled at his sanctimonious tone. "Well, I wouldn't want to come between a man and his country."

Once they were in the theater, Jordan realized that the line of people outside hadn't been waiting for whatever showing they were attending. The commercials had already started, but they weren't for any of the upcoming films she had seen advertised between Mrs. Herrin's shows. She followed Darren down an aisle toward the center of the theater and sat down, helping him arrange the array of snacks he'd bought.

"We're never going to finish all of this," she said worriedly.

"'Life is a journey, not a destination,'" said Darren, tossing a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

"Emerson?" she laughed.

"Ah, so you were allowed some secular influence in that convent," he teased.

"I may have sneaked some books out of my father's library a time or two," she admitted, watching the screen as the commercials disappeared and it went black. "What are we watching?"

"Shh, it's starting," he said in mock severity, holding a finger to his lips even though they were the only ones in the theater.

Jordan's curiosity faded into excitement as she recognized the red credit text overlaid on footage of a series of brick apartment buildings seen through an all too familiar window. "*Rear Window*? It can't still be playing," she whispered.

He laughed. "This theater brings back the classics every now and again. I thought you might like the chance to see it on the big screen after I fell asleep on you."

"But it's so old," she said, looking around. "No one else is here."

His silence fueled her fast-growing suspicions.

"Darren, did you--?"

"I may have put in a suggestion with the owner," he admitted reluctantly, "whom I may or may not have gone to college with."

Jordan let out a gleeful squeak and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him hard on the cheek.

"Whoa, easy," he laughed. "I almost got a lap full of soda."

"This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," she said, gazing at him.

"That's a shame," he said, cupping her cheek in his hand. "You deserve a hell of a lot more than this."

As Darren leaned in, Jordan felt sure he was going to kiss her, but a shadow passing over the screen drew their attention. The tall man wore a hoodie that he left in place as he took a seat towards the front of the theater.

"Guess you're not the only one with a taste for the classics," Darren said, clearly irritated by the other man's presence. He draped an arm around Jordan's shoulder and settled in to watch. Jordan watched the screen but couldn't keep from glancing down at the stranger every now and then. Soon enough, he faded into the background as she became enraptured in the film she knew well enough to silently mouth the lines to her favorite scenes.

Darren was right. Watching it on the big screen really was something else.

Jordan had nearly forgotten about the man in the front until he rose from his seat a few minutes away from the ending. It was impossible to make out his features in the dark and he moved so quickly that he was gone before she could really try.

“Must not have liked where it was headed,” Darren mused.

“Yeah, maybe,” Jordan murmured, struggling to return her focus to the screen. She was still on edge after the only other occupant's quick exit, so she jolted when Darren's hand crept up her thigh.

“Darren,” she laughed breathily as his hand slipped between her legs.

“Making out in a dark empty theater as the credits roll is an American pastime in and of itself,” he purred, pressing his lips against her neck. When he started stroking her through the thin fabric of her panties, Jordan found herself squirming for more. She glanced behind her just to triple check that they truly were alone, but Darren’s touch was making it hard to care.

“We're in public,” she whispered.

“No one's around and it's dark,” he reminded her, slipping a finger past the cotton of her panties. His lips claimed hers and when his tongue slipped into her mouth, all the thoughts of decency fled her. She moaned softly as he swept a finger along her slit before slipping it inside. It hurt a little, but the way it felt when it moved inside of her more than made up for the pain.

It was a bit unnerving that Darren seemed to know her body and the sensations it was capable of better than she did, but mostly it was mesmerizing. His kiss was hard and searching and while Jordan wasn't entirely sure what it was that he was seeking, every inch of her wanted to give it to him.

A familiar warmth began to surge inside of her, mounting with every expert stroke of his finger. Her legs trembled as he held her and pressed against the strange spot inside of her he had awakened with more fervor until she tensed violently and a whirlwind of pleasure swept over her. She gasped but he kissed her before she could give them away.

He slipped his hand from underneath her skirt and gazed down at her with that familiar look of satisfaction and arousal. That look was capable of doing almost as much to her as his touch. If he had asked her to leave the theater then and there to go to a hotel, Jordan knew what her answer would have been.

Instead, he draped an arm around her and put up the arm rest so she could nestle against his side. Jordan struggled to catch her breath and refocus on the movie, but it was a lost cause. As the credits continued to roll, Darren started cleaning up the empty containers, most of them his. Jordan had been right that they couldn't finish it all but was alarmed by how much they had. "We're leaving?"

"Well, yeah," he said, giving her a confused look. "It's just the credits."

"Oh."

He laughed. "This movie is more than sixty years old, I think we'd know by now if there was a secret ending."

"It's not that. It's just, look how many names there are," she said, glancing at the scrolling text. "Each one of those people worked so hard. Most of them didn't even get to appear on screen. Maybe it was the best thing they ever did, and the only recognition they get for it is their name flashing up on screen for a second after everyone has already left."

Darren returned to his seat, frowning. "When you put it that way, I kind of feel like an asshole. Didn't you miss half of them anyway?"

She laughed a little. "I just try to pick one name anyway, and it's usually toward the end."

"One person, huh? And then what?"

She shrugged. "I just think about how hard they must have worked and what they might have done that the movie wouldn't have been the same without."

He snorted. "Alright, I'll give it a try. Who'd you pick this time?"

Jordan leaned forward, pushing up her glasses. "Bill Lang, Background Visuals. Maybe he's the one who decided the floor should be checkered. Maybe it even inspired the patterns in *Vertigo*."

"An interesting theory. Okay, I've got one."

"Go on," she grinned.

"Ian Donnely, Makeup Assistant," he announced. "The man may not have been Hitchcock, but by God, did he keep Grace Kelly's nose powdered and James Stewart's eyebrows groomed."

Jordan burst into laughter. "See, now you've fully experienced the movie, and the best part is, there's something new to experience each time."

"Sounds good to me," he said, leaning in. He paused for such a long moment that she thought he might try to kiss her again, but instead he took her hand and helped her out of her seat. "Come on, let's go get dinner."

"After all that food?" she balked.

"It is the American way," he said in a solemn tone.

She snickered. “Well, maybe something light."

As they walked out into the lobby, Jordan's phone rang. She frowned, digging the phone out of the bottom of her bag.

"Do you need to take that?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, staring at the word "RESTRICTED" that flashed on her screen where a number should have been. "What is that?”

Darren leaned over, frowning. "It's probably just a telemarketer. Do you know anyone who'd want to block their number?"

"No," she said, feeling an old dread building in the pit of her stomach. "I haven't even given the number to Mrs. Herrin yet. You and Cindy are the only ones who know it."

"You'd better answer it, then." He seemed to sense her hesitation. "Or I could answer it for you."

"Yes, please," she said softly, holding it out to him.

Darren led them to a vacant area of the lobby and flipped the phone open. "Hello?"

Jordan strained to listen to the voice on the other line as Darren's default expression of apathy turned into a frown. "Oh. Uh, hang on just a sec."

"Who is it?" Jordan mouthed.

Darren covered the mouthpiece. "He says he's your father."

Suddenly the dread made sense. The man in the hoodie flickered in her mind again. Darren must have noticed the terror in her eyes because he said, "If you want me to tell him to fuck off--"

"No, please don't do that," she said earnestly. "I'll take the call, but I need some privacy, if that's okay."

"Of course," he said, watching her warily. "I'll go toss this stuff in the trash and wait in the arcade."

"Thank you," she said, taking the phone with trembling hands. Darren didn't leave right away. In fact, he lingered so long she thought he wasn't going to leave at all, but he did. Part of her wanted to run after him and tell him to throw the phone away with the rest of the trash, but she didn't. She took a deep breath and composed herself until she could formulate a convincingly confident, "Hello?"

She sounded like a simpering child, even to herself.

"It's good to hear your voice again, Alyssa," came her father's unmistakably smooth Southern drawl. "You've changed a lot since I saw you in court. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were just another city whore."

Jordan turned towards the wall just in case Darren was watching. She didn't want him to see her grimace. "How did you get this number, daddy?"

"You've lost your accent," he said with a disapproving click of his tongue. "You know what they say. You can take the girl out of Arkansas, but you can't take Arkansas out of the girl."

"What do you want? The judge told you not to contact me."

"You know as well as I do ain't no judge got the authority to come between a man and what's his," said Byron, his genial mask already starting to slip. "And you are mine, Alyssa June. My daughter, my healer, my property."

Jordan took a deep breath, keeping her hand over the receiver so he wouldn't hear how shaky it was. "That's not my name anymore," she said, cringing as the accent she had taken months of voice lessons to erase returned despite her best attempts to mask it.

"I know. You go by Jordan now. Jordan Adams," he sneered. "At least until you trick that fool animal doctor into making you his wife. Shoulda known you'd run off and open your legs to the first man willing to feed you lies."

"You've been watching me," she said, placing a hand on her churning stomach. She knew better than to respond to his taunts.

"'Course I have. You think I was gonna throw you to the wolves just 'cause some piece of paper says so?" he asked in a cloying tone. "I got higher orders than that and he's got a bigger plan in store for you, girl."

"I'm never going back," she said, reigning in her trembling voice. "I'm not yours to use and lock up as you see fit now. I don't know how you got this number, but I'm not alone anymore. I've got a life and people who care about me. They'll--"

"They'll what?" he interrupted. His voice had turned from syrup to arsenic on the edge of a single word. "Your knight in shining armor is gonna come and rescue you? You know what the Lord does to those who stand in his way. One way or another, you'll be back where you belong. I guess it's up to you how many casualties there are along the way."

Rage exploded through the terror. "You listen here," Jordan seethed, only to be cut off by the sound of the phone slamming into its cradle. Her father always used analog phones. Digital ones sent signals to the government, he said. Signals the government used for tracking servants doing the Lord's work.

Jordan struggled to collect herself. She could already see Darren walking over from the arcade game he had been pretending to play. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," she said stiffly, looking back over her shoulder. There was still a group from one of the other showings gathered around talking by the snack stand, but there was no sign of the man in the hoodie. "Can we get out of here?"

She could tell he wanted to ask more questions but, as always, Darren was too much of a gentleman to pry. "Sure," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. The simple touch made her feel more secure in an instant, but it was fleeting unlike the all-encompassing feeling of safety she had felt in his arms. The little bubble of distance she had created between her and Arkansas had been popped by a single phone call.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

"No," she said quickly once they were outside. The rain had stopped but the pavement glistened more than ever. "I want to enjoy the rest of the evening. Maybe we can skip the food, though? I'm kind of nauseous."

"No problem," he said, glancing around. "Most places are closed anyway, but I think I know something we could do. Come on," he said, nodding over his shoulder as he set off down the sidewalk. "It's close enough that we can walk."

"Where are we going?" Jordan asked, following him. She glanced behind her every few steps just to make sure the man in the hoodie wasn't following both of them.

Darren looked back at her with an easy smile and in that moment, Jordan realized that all the dread and terror she had felt during that phone call wasn't on her own behalf. "Come on," he said in that teasing tone that could always be counted on to make her heart do a somersault in her chest. "Have a little faith."

Darren came to a sudden stop and asked, "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do," she mumbled.

“Then close your eyes and let me lead you somewhere.”

She hesitated only a moment before doing what he asked. He took her hand to lead her forward and the trip to wherever he was taking her wasn't a long one.

"I hear running water," Jordan said, her curiosity getting the best of her frayed nerves as they came to a stop. "Are we near a stream?"

"Guess again," he said mischievously.

"You could just show me."

"Alright, alright. Go ahead and look."

Jordan opened her eyes to discover that the water was coming from the four streams flowing around a large stone fountain in the center of the memorial park Darren had led them to. The second thing she noticed was the towering stone angel in the center of the fountain. The angel's head was bowed and its hands covered its eyes as it wept.

The sight was probably a beautiful one to any normal person, but it filled Jordan with the same kind of dread that had accompanied the sound of her father's voice. Her chest tightened and as she backed away from the fountain, she felt her composure slowly unwinding.

"Whoa," Darren said, reaching out to steady her. "What's wrong?"

Jordan tore her gaze away from the angel's blank stone eyes and looked at Darren. "I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "It's nothing. It's… beautiful."

"Don't be sorry, just tell me what's wrong so I can fix it," he said, his voice full of concern as he placed his strong hands on her shoulders. His brow was knit with worry as his eyes searched hers for the answers she couldn't give.

Jordan swallowed in hopes of gaining control over her voice and cutting off the panic attack before it could spiral any further. "It's just the statue, it…" Her voice stopped working again, but even if it hadn't, she was at a loss to explain herself.

It was just a statue. A statue of an angel, no less.

"Come on," Darren said, putting his arm around her shoulder to usher her quickly down the trail. "Let's get you out of here."

Once they were safely out of view of the angel, Jordan took a deep breath. The crisp night air was the only thing staving off an impending panic attack. Once she was a bit calmer, humiliation took over again. "I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," he muttered. "I don't know what I was thinking, bringing you to a cemetery. Granted, I haven't been on

a date in years, but that's a bit macabre even for me."

"It's not the cemetery," she said quickly, eager to bear more humiliation if it meant he wouldn't blame himself for her meltdown. She took a deep breath and said, "It's angels. I have a phobia of angels."

He blinked. "Angels? Like the fat babies flying around shooting arrows, or--"

"No," she said sharply, looking away. "Real angels, not the fake ones the stories are based on."

He remained quiet, waiting for her to go on.

"I must sound like such a lunatic to you. Here I am freaking out over something you don't even believe in."

"If phobias were rational, no one would have them," he said gently, sitting down on a nearby bench. He pulled her down beside him. "When I was a kid, I was afraid of plants."

"Plants?" she asked warily.

"Yep. Caught a glimpse of an old campy horror movie my dad was watching," he said. “That one about the big Venus flytrap that ate people. Freaked me out so bad I couldn't go into the lawn-and-garden section for a year."

Jordan couldn't help but laugh. "You must really hate my place."

"It took some getting used to," he said with a grin. "It's not easy to avoid greenery when you live in a town planted in the middle of the forest. The point is, every fear comes from something that's real to you, no matter how silly it seems to everyone else. What is it about angels that bothers you so much?"

She hesitated. "I could tell you, but it involves the Bible.”

He shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first date I've had that ended that way."

Jordan tried to laugh, but the sound got choked out by the tightness in her throat. “What do you think of when you envision angels, Darren? Besides the babies selling holiday candy."

He considered that for a moment. "I don't know. I guess a beautiful person with wings, maybe a halo."

“They’re not,” she said quietly. “In the Bible, they’re described as monstrous beings so terrible and beautiful that people die just from the sight of them. You can’t look at something that’s seen the face of God without being filled with terror. Angels are just part of the world I grew up in, and I learned a long time ago that there’s a dark side to everything. There’s the

version people see, and then how it really is. Once you know some truths, you can’t ever get them out of your head.”

Darren placed a hand on her shoulder and his touch threatened to undo what little composure she had gained. "You can talk to me, Jordan. You don't have to tell me about your father or your past, but if you do, I promise that it won’t change anything between us. It won’t change the way I feel about you.”

She stared at him, warring with herself. At first, she had kept her past from Darren because it wasn't safe, but after the phone call she knew he was already in danger. He had a right to know what he was getting into, at the very least. A right to put as much distance between them as she had put between herself and Arkansas.

The resignation gave her strength and she sat up, drying her eyes. "Okay, Darren," she said quietly. "I'll tell you everything."

# FIFTEEN

SOME STORIES WERE as hard to escape as they were to tell, and Jordan knew there was a chance that once she'd finished, Darren would want nothing to do with her. She promised herself that if that was the case, she would accept it. Sometimes she wished she had the same option.

"When I was born, my father said he received a vision," Jordan began. "Until then, he'd been nothing more than a second-rate assistant pastor, but an angel appeared to him in a dream--the first of many--and told him I was special. Not because of who I was, but because I had gifts that would make my father great."

"Gifts?" Darren asked. "You mean your uh, spells?"

"More or less," Jordan replied. "We called it faith healing back then. The branding made it easier to sell to his 'flock.'"

"Oh," he said knowingly. "Like the con men on TV?"

"Yes, only in our case, it was all real," she murmured. "The healing, the miracles, everything. I don't expect you to believe me. That's not why I'm telling you any of this, but my father believes it wholeheartedly and so did a lot of other people. He became regionally famous by using my power and people would come from thousands of miles away just to be at one of his services in hopes of getting healed."

"And your mother just allowed him to traipse you out onstage like a prop?" Darren asked, his voice rough. Jordan knew he didn't believe a word about the magic, but he believed her about the abuse, and that was enough. It had been so long since she'd told anyone, sometimes it felt like a festering wound inside of her. It felt good to air it out, even if it did probably mean the end of their relationship.

"Of course," said Jordan. "She was a ‘godly wife.' She never would’ve questioned her husband even if she didn't support it wholeheartedly. My brother Ezekiel was the only one who ever actually objected, and they punished him for it so severely that I cooperated."

"Jordan, I'm so sorry."

She shook her head. "Save your pity for when I'm done and you'll realize I don't deserve it at all.“

He frowned and she could tell he wanted to argue, but he didn't.

"As I grew up, my father kept receiving visions but he stopped telling us what they were about," she continued. "At least, he stopped telling me. He changed, too. He hated my brother, but I had always been the golden child." She swallowed her revulsion before adding, "His angel. That changed when I was thirteen. I don't know what the angel who gave him the visions told him, but he started being even more controlling. I was always homeschooled, but they let me go to Sunday school and see the other kids at the church my father started. All of a sudden he decided they would be a bad influence and that I had to be kept ‘pure’ and separate from outsiders. Ezekiel was the only friend I had. Even then, they would keep us apart if I hadn't performed adequately at service."

She took a deep breath, trying to stuff the memories down. "One night at service, everything changed. It was a normal night. We were visiting a local town and the tent we held the service in was packed, as usual. A few people were brought up to be healed. A woman with epilepsy and an older man with dementia," she said softly. "The only thing out of the ordinary was how my father was acting. He seemed nervous, and for someone who thinks God is on his side, that's saying something."

"I'd imagine so," muttered Darren.

"I saw strange things a lot back then--you'd probably say I was hallucinating, and maybe I was--but I haven't been the same after what I saw that night," Jordan said, her voice cracking. She couldn't bear to look at him or the way she knew his face would change when he heard what she had to say next. "There was a bright light, brighter than anything I've ever seen before or after. It came from outside the tent and then it came closer. The light was coming from eyes spinning in the air on two huge wheels."

Darren blinked. “What the hell was that?”

“An angel,” she muttered. “The way they’re actually described, anyway. That’s the last thing I really remember. There was an explosion and I

blacked out. When I woke up, everything was burned to the ground. Everyone at the service except for me and my father was killed that night in the fire. There was an investigation, of course, but the fire department couldn't find the source and they ruled it an accident. Even the fire marshal said he didn't know how my father and I got out. Our clothes were burned. We'd been at the center of the explosion, and we shouldn't have survived, let alone without a scratch on either of us."

"What caused the explosion?" Darren asked warily.

Jordan stared at him for a moment, deciding she owed him the whole truth since she had already taken him this far. "It was me. I don't know how or even remember it, but my father and I are the only two people who actually know the truth about that night. At least part of it…"

"Jordan, you seriously can't believe you had anything to do with that. It was a freak accident, and your father is insane. For all we know, *he* started the fire himself."

"You don't understand," she murmured. "You don't believe in any of this, but I do. Not because I want to, but because I've lived it. My mother and brother are dead because I'm a supernatural freak. Because I've always been able to *do* things that no one should be able to do, and when it finally got out of control, I killed them. Healing those people was just a side effect. All I'm really good for is destruction."

Jordan took a deep breath and forced herself to carry on, knowing that if she didn't tell him then she never would. "After the fire, my father went underground for a while to let the press die down. We stayed in our old home, but he stopped holding meetings and started locking me away in the attic. He said it was so I couldn't hurt anyone else, and I believed him. At first, I didn't want to leave. I just wanted to die and being all alone in that dark place with no human contact was the next best thing."

Darren reached out and when he pulled her into his arms, Jordan was too shocked to pull away. When he held her close and whispered some word of comfort she couldn't make out over her own crying, she broke down completely.

She had expected him to call her crazy, or even worse, to believe every word she said and push her away like he would have done if he had any common sense. She had never even let herself entertain the idea of a long-term relationship, knowing that it was only a matter of time before the truth came out. Or worse, before she hurt someone. The fact that he *knew* and he

was still here wasn’t something she had ever dared to expect, and she didn’t know what to do now that it was happening.

He held her like that for a length of time she couldn't even begin to quantify. It could have just as easily been a few minutes as a few hours. The words didn't matter, though. He wasn't running from her in disgust. She knew there was a good chance that he simply didn't believe any of it, but it didn't matter. Not for the moment.

When Jordan finally collected herself, she felt as raw as she had while telling her story. She wasn’t used to being open with anyone, let alone breaking down.

"How did you get out?" he finally asked, breaking the silence between them without letting go.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Months of captivity turned into years and I opened the door on a whim. I don't even know why. I hadn't tried to leave in so long, maybe it had been open for a long time and I just didn't realize it, but something took over me and I ran. It was like a voice in my head telling me to get out, and I couldn't hear or think of anything else. I didn't even know where I was going, but I got out of the house and I just kept running. A police officer found me by the side of the road a few towns away. At first, I was afraid he was just going to take me back home, but he didn't. He was the first person I had seen besides my father in so long and he was so kind that I just started telling him everything. I don't even remember what I told him, I just remember him helping me into his car and then being wrapped up in a blanket at the station. They filed a report and handed me over to a social worker. She helped me with a lot of things. I stayed in a shelter for a while, and there was a counselor there who helped me, too."

She paused to wipe her eyes and realized her mascara had smudged hopelessly. "There’s so much I missed out on, not just because of being locked up in the attic but because of the way Ezekiel and I were raised. It was overwhelming, like waking up in a different world. At first, all I wanted to do was go back to isolation, but there were so many good people who helped me find my place. I had a counselor who convinced me that everything my father had done was wrong. She encouraged me to file charges. They arrested my father and put him away for five years, but my counselor insisted that filing a lawsuit against his ‘ministry’ was the best way to ensure that he couldn't use the money he'd made off of me to come after me in the future."

"Five years?" Darren snarled. "That bastard should be in prison for the rest of his life."

"Apparently, the judge didn't agree," she murmured. "He got out early. I was warned that's probably what would happen. It was my word against his. None of his former congregants would testify against him, and the rest were dead. I won the lawsuit, though, and it was more than enough to change my name and identity to move on. As far as anyone in my hometown knows, Alyssa Hurlow is dead. Everyone except him, apparently.“

"Well, that explains a lot," said Darren, raking a hand through his hair. "It still doesn't explain how he found you here.”

"My father may have kept his family away from the ‘corrupting influence of technology,’ but it seems he found me the same way you did," Jordan said dryly. "I drew attention to myself in the other towns. It was only a matter of time before he found me. I'm sure he was watching the Internet for miracle healings."

"And he knew you were too soft-hearted to resist," Darren muttered.

Jordan looked up at him in surprise. “So you do believe me?"

"Do I believe you have supernatural powers? No," he said firmly. "I think your whack-job parents just brainwashed you into believing it to make money, but that doesn't make what you went through any less real. Do I believe you? Of course I do."

Jordan pursed her lips, struggling to fight down the emotion stirred by his words.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You didn't. I just didn't think you'd react this way. I thought--"

"You thought I'd see you differently? The way your father does?"

“Yeah,” she said hoarsely. “I guess so.”

Darren pulled her close again, sweeping the curve of her jaw with his knuckles. The look in his eyes was so earnest and gentle that it made her heart ache. "I don't care if you're Alyssa Hurlow or Jordan Adams or the fucking antichrist himself, I see you for what you really are. Beautiful, kind to a fault and a little crazy, but also the bravest person I've ever met. I love you.”

Jordan froze. All she could do was stare at him in shock and wait for him to take it back. A slow smile spread across his face and he added, "You heard me. I love you, Jordan,” he repeated. “I know it's a bit soon, but one

day, if you're willing, I have every intention of being the reason you change your name for the second and final time."

A strangled laugh escaped her. Relief and dismay bubbled over, impossible to contain. She shouldn’t be feeling this way at all. She didn’t know when her guard had dropped low enough to actually start falling seriously for him, but she’d never imagined that she would have to worry about it since it just didn’t seem possible that he would ever feel that way in return. “Darren, think about what you're saying. Even if you only accept the parts that are purely logical, my life is a trainwreck. You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

Darren cupped her face in both hands and kissed her with gentleness that made her feel like she was about to shatter. “If you haven't noticed, I'm kind of a trainwreck myself, but the thing is… I kind of like the way our broken pieces fit together."

Jordan felt a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "I kind of like it, too."

"Good. Because I’m not going anywhere. Not until you get sick of me.”

Jordan pulled away and frowned as reality set back in. "Darren, my father threatened you on the phone. If I stay in Cold Creek, you're in danger."

"Do I look like someone who would be intimidated by a televangelist?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"You don't understand. He knows people."

"Yeah, I'm sure he's got a rough choir that could fuck me up, and maybe some priests, too, but I'll take my chances," he said wryly.

"Pentecostals don't have priests, Darren."

He rolled his eyes. "Either way, I'm not letting him come between me and the best thing that's ever happened to me. If he steps foot in Cold Creek, he's gonna be begging that judge to put him back in his cell."

Jordan laid her head on his shoulder and sighed. His confidence was starting to get to her. Her father was certainly no physical match for Darren, but she also knew that she had no hope of convincing Darren of any spiritual threat. Despite knowing better, Jordan had every intention of clinging to the false sense of security while it lasted. Even a lie could be a beautiful thing when it was all you had.

# SIXTEEN

JORDAN KNEW that once word about her relationship with Darren officially spread it was only a matter of time before they were invited to one of Cindy's infamous dinner parties. She just hadn't imagined that her friend would throw one for that sole reason.

Darren was clearly less than enthused, but he had agreed to go. He had also agreed to wear a blazer for the occasion, but Jordan hadn't been successful in talking him out of jeans. At least the party was an excuse to be around him without having to talk about her father. Ever since that night in the park, Darren had been doggedly determined to get her to file a police report and wasn't moved by her hesitation. After all, to someone who didn't believe in anything, the fear of angering an avenging angel wasn't a sufficient reason for not reporting harassment.

There was a car Jordan didn't recognize in the driveway, but she wouldn't have been surprised to find that Henry had more than one. There weren't nearly enough cars to suggest a dinner party, which set her nerves off. As kind as he was, Henry made her nervous and she wasn't crazy about the idea of an intimate evening as the subject of his suspicious glances and questions. That night she had even more reason to be nervous around him for fear that Darren would try to enlist his help against her father.

Darren gave her arm a comforting squeeze and a warm, calm feeling radiated out from his touch and throughout the rest of her body. "No reason to be nervous. It's just dinner."

"Do I really look like that much of a nervous wreck?"

He gave her a reassuring smile before lifting the door knocker shaped like a wolf's head. "Henry has that effect on people."

A moment later, Cindy's maid opened the door. "Dr. St. Clair and Ms. Adams," she said warmly, stepping aside to let them through. “Welcome.”

"Evening, Hanna," said Darren. He helped Jordan out of her coat before offering the maid his own.

"You'll be in the dining room this evening," Hanna said, motioning for them to follow her down the long corridor. Jordan looked around while trying not to be too obvious about her fascination over the decor. Her father's estate was no cottage, but it was furnished with gaudy items purchased with money that had been fleeced from his blue collar congregants. There were no abstract paintings of doves, plated gold candelabras or large white leather couches to be found in the Danbridge's home. The New England colonial was filled with tasteful upholstery, antique furniture, dark woods and enough narrow hallways to constitute a maze.

Cindy's fine tastes were evident in the art that hung on the walls, but Jordan knew the mayor and his wife weren't the only family members who lived at Danbridge Hall. Part of the reason she was so nervous about going to the party was the idea of running into one of them.

"Quite the sight, isn't it?" Darren asked so only she could hear.

"It feels like the type of place you'd take a tour to see," she whispered back.

"You can in the summertime," he said matter-of-factly. "The Danbridges pretty much built this town. A handful of them came over on the Mayflower."

That explained a lot. Old money had a way of multiplying. She couldn’t help but wonder why Max worked at the post office if it obviously wasn’t a necessity. Then again, from the way Chase told it, they all held some government post or another.

"Here you are," said Hanna, gesturing for them to walk through the open door that led into the dining room. Cindy and Henry were already seated at the head of a beautifully set oak table. Henry’s keen eyes were tired, ringed with purple so deep it almost looked like a bruise. Tina was there, which could very well have been the reason for his exhaustion, and there was an older man Jordan didn't recognize seated next to her.

"Welcome," Cindy called, waving to them from across the table. "Come have a glass of wine, we're just waiting for two more to arrive! I'm sure you all know each other already."

Jordan hesitated, looking at the man she didn't recognize. He was in his sixties with a handsome, well-lined face and kind eyes. "I'm afraid we don't," she admitted.

The older man stood, offering her a warm handshake. "Alec Meridan, I run the butcher shop. Judging from the fact you're the only person I've never met, I'm guessing you're a vegetarian."

Jordan gave him a timid smile. “I am. But my landlady’s a big fan of your meat.”

It took her a moment to realize why they were all staring at her. When Alec unleashed a hoarse gale of laughter, Jordan realized her mistake and her cheeks turned bright red. Soon enough everyone else was laughing. Even Henry. Jordan wasn't sure whether to be mortified or flattered that she had gotten him to crack a smile. She settled on the former and took a long gulp of wine. “Usually I at least wait until dessert to humiliate myself.”

Alec was still laughing so hard it was almost a wheeze. "Haven't laughed like that in a good long time," he said, wiping the corner of his eye.

Darren touched Jordan’s arm but he was laughing the hardest of all. She elbowed him in the ribs, which just made him double over even more.

"You men have such gutter minds," Cindy huffed, even though she’d been cackling too.

The door swung open and Max strode into the room like he owned it. It was the first time Jordan had seen him in anything other than his work uniform or a three-piece suit. He was by far the least formal member of the group and went as far as wearing a sleeveless white tank top that showcased his muscular frame. Judging from the look on his face, the dining room was the very last place on earth he wanted to be.

Max’s eyes met Jordan’s from across the table as he took a seat next to his aunt. The small smile he gave Jordan didn’t quite meet his eyes. The dark circles around them made the resemblance between him and Henry all the stronger. “Sorry I’m late.”

"Where's Lauren?" Tina asked, looking toward the door as if expecting someone else to walk through it.

Max took a sip of his wine before answering, "She's not coming.”

The room was silent for a moment as if everyone expected further explanation. When it became clear that Max wasn’t going to offer one, Henry cleared his throat and folded his hands in front of him on the table.

“Well, now that everyone’s here, I’d like to thank you all for joining us. Good company is a hard thing to come by,” he said, raising his glass.

Jordan joined the toast, but she remained fixated on Max. So did Darren and Henry. Something was obviously wrong, and Jordan very much doubted it stopped at a no-show dinner date.

Fortunately, Alec’s jovial nature and endless stories kept things lighthearted. Some of the tales from his Navy days were less than believable, but he told them with such animation and conviction that it hardly mattered. He and Henry were obviously good friends, despite the age difference between them.

When dessert was over, the two men wandered off for cigars and more alcohol, leaving Cindy and Darren to discuss matters of the town. Soon enough, the conversation turned into one of Cindy's infamous attempts to get Darren to join the town council. The argument began with an eyeroll and escalated into a match of raised tones. Tina seemed to be enjoying the spectatorship, but Max stared off into space. It was clear that he didn’t want to be there and even clearer that not all of him was.

"I don't know why you can't be more like your girlfriend," Cindy said, snapping Jordan out of her thoughts. "She's only been here a couple of months, and already she's volunteered to help with the festival and the relay race."

"That's probably because she can't say no to pushy people like you," Darren shot back.

Cindy rolled her eyes. "That is not true. Is it, Jordan?"

"I'm sorry?"

Cindy frowned. "You want to help with the festival out of your own free will, don't you?"

"You're being pushy right now!" Darren cried.

"It's fine, really, I'm happy to help with the festival," said Jordan. Sure, Cindy was a bit pushy, but she didn’t mind the chance to make a slightly better impression on the other townsfolk. There were still plenty of people who looked at her like she was going to turn them into frogs if they blinked the wrong way.

"Oh, good," Cindy said, doing such a one-eighty that Jordan couldn't help but feel a bit manipulated. "That reminds me, I got the costume back after your fitting. You may as well try it on while you're here so I can send it back if it needs any finally alterations.

"Here?" Jordan echoed.

"What costume?" Darren asked, scowling.

"The exploitative little genie costume Cindy is making her wear to drive traffic to the fortuneteller's booth," Tina replied nonchalantly. She loved nothing more than ratting out her sister's plans. The two of them reminded Jordan of a pair of geese, always pecking at each other yet flocking together anyway.

Cindy looked at her with pure vitriol. "You make it sound so tawdry. There's nothing wrong with using a pretty girl to draw a crowd for a good cause."

"So it's a strip club for charity," Tina sneered.

"It is nothing of the sort!" Cindy huffed. "And it's not exploitative."

"I'll be the judge of that," said Darren.

"My, you're really latching onto the macho man role this time," mused Tina.

This time, Cindy *and* Darren glared at her.

"Fine," Cindy said with an agitated sigh. "Come see it for yourself."

Darren hesitated, looking over at Jordan. "As long as Jordan is alright with it."

"I don't mind, but *now*?" There were a lot of ways she'd imagined the evening going, but an impromptu fashion show in front of her boyfriend wasn't one of them.

"No time like the present," Cindy said, ushering her toward the door.

"I want to see. And while you're at it, show me the costume you picked out for me," Tina said, stalking after them. "I don't trust your judgment."

"If I had any judgment, *yours* would be a burlap sack," Cindy taunted, opening a door at the end of the hall. She pulled a couple of garment bags out of the closet and handed one to Jordan and the other to Tina. "You can get changed in here. Tina, I'm sure you can just call on a cloud of sulfur and transform."

"Would you shut your mouth, you old hag?" Tina snapped. Jordan shut the door to the spare bedroom and heard them continuing to bicker down the hall. She unzipped the garment bag and pulled on the surprisingly high-quality blue and purple silk costume on. She hadn't thought much about it during the initial fitting, but as soon as she walked out and realized Max had joined the others, she became keenly aware of just how much of her cleavage and midriff were exposed.

Old habits died hard, and so did old attitudes toward modesty that had been drilled into her head her whole life. She squared her shoulders and folded her arms, trying to look the part of the confident woman she only felt like half the time. “Well? How does it look?” she asked when she finally realized Darren wasn’t going to say anything. She could read the look on his face enough to know his silence was not from disapproval, but it was the look in Max’s eyes that she didn’t know what to do with. Their golden depths were always intimidating, but there was something predatory in that gaze tonight.

The younger Danbridge swallowed audibly and looked away as Tina came out of the room in a black-and-white Puritan costume. The scowl on her face as she examined herself in the mirror made it clear what she thought of her new look.

"I think their tongues are tied," Cindy said dryly, breaking the heavy silence. She smiled approvingly as she looked over Jordan’s costume, tugging at the beaded waistband. “They did a nice job on the alterations. I think it’s perfect.”

“You look beautiful,” Darren said gruffly, even though his eyes were set on his friend. Evidently, Jordan wasn’t the only one who’d noticed Max staring.

“Thanks. I just hope it’s not too cold at the festival,” she said, eager to change the subject.

“Well, I’m burning up!” Tina complained, fussing with her apron. “What is this thing made of, wool?”

“It’s historically accurate,” Cindy said in an innocent tone, clearly enjoying her sister’s distress.

“I think you look nice,” Jordan offered. “It’s very…eye catching?”

Tina’s cheeks filled with air as she glared at her own reflection. “I’m not wearing it.”

“There’s no time to change the order now!” cried Cindy.

“Well, then have them take the hem up a little. Make it sexier.”

“There’s no such thing as a sexy Puritan!”

Jordan ducked back into the room to change before the debate became the next world war. When she came back out, Darren and Max were talking to each other, albeit guardedly.

"How about we take some beers out onto the terrace? This could go on for hours," Max said, nodding to his aunts who were still arguing about how

much skin a Puritan woman was allowed to show.

Darren cast a wary glance at Jordan. "If you're alright with it."

“Yeah, sure,“ she said, confused by the implication that she shouldn't be. “The fresh air would be nice.”

Max nodded. "Go ahead and show yourselves out, I'll be up in a minute."

Darren motioned for Jordan to follow him as he led her through one of the winding hallways and out onto a veranda.

"Wanna tell me what that was all about?" Jordan asked once she was sure they were alone.

“Cindy and Tina? They’re always like that.”

“I’m talking about Max.” She got the feeling he knew it, too.

Darren shrugged. “I’d tell you if I knew."

Before she could call bullshit, Max walked out onto the veranda carrying a six pack. He leaned back against the railing, seemingly careless of the steep dropoff behind him. Once everyone had a beer in hand, Jordan found herself wondering if alcohol was going to be enough to ease the tension that was even greater than it had been inside.

"So," said Darren, "Lauren couldn't make it?”

Max shot him a dirty look, but it was nothing compared to the one he’d given Jordan earlier. “She’s busy.”

Jordan couldn't help but feel like the simple statements held more information than she was privy to. “So, Lauren is your girlfriend?” She felt absurd asking such an obvious question she already had the answer to, but it was clear neither of them was going to further the conversation.

"Ex-girlfriend," Max corrected her, taking a long gulp of beer.

"What?" Darren asked sharply, his entire demeanor shifting. "Since when?"

"Since tonight.”

"What the hell happened?"

"If you two want to talk alone, I can go inside," Jordan offered.

"Stay," they said in unison.

Jordan blinked. Men were so fucking weird. “Okay…”

“There’s not much to tell," Max said gruffly. “Just didn’t work out.”

"Bullshit," Darren said with such fervor it made Jordan jolt. "You've been together for years. How the hell did it 'just not work out' after all this time?"

Max shrugged. "I realized I couldn't commit the way she needed me to. Figured she deserved to know that now since she was thinking of waiting to go to grad school so she wouldn't have to leave town."

"You were thinking about proposing the last time we talked! Exactly how much more of a commitment is there?"

Max cut a sharp silhouette leaning against the railing with slicked back hair and a careless posture, but the deep sadness in his eyes was what really reminded Jordan of James Dean. “I’m just being realistic.”

Darren's eyes narrowed. "No, something happened. This isn't you, something changed. What the fuck did you do?"

"Darren," Jordan murmured.

"It's fine," said Max. "I deserve the judgment. Yes, Darren, I did exactly what you're thinking. Lauren was the best thing that ever happened to me and I threw it all away for a girl I don't even know. Happy?”

Darren stared at his friend for a long moment with an unreadable look on his face. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but each time he started, he ended up just shaking his head. Finally, he muttered, “I hope she was worth it.”

"Maybe she is," Max mused. "Doesn't matter. Turns out she's got a boyfriend. That's karma, I guess."

Darren rolled his eyes. "No, that's what happens when you throw away a good thing for a one-night stand." He sighed. "Maybe it's not too late. If you talk to Lauren, maybe she --"

Max shook his head. "This was bound to happen sooner or later. I've known Lauren wasn't the one for a while. Guess I just loved her enough to think maybe I could force it, but you can't buck destiny forever."

Darren's eye twitched. "Don't blame the fact that you can't keep it in your pants on unseen forces. You've always been the one person in this town I can count on to be above that bullshit."

*Ouch*. Jordan winced, but it *did* seem like a copout to use fate as an excuse for infidelity.

“Call it the family curse,” Max muttered. “Thought I was smart enough to outrun it, ignore it, maybe even change it if I fought hard enough, but it was all a wash. Like my grandad always said, only two things are sure in life: Taxes and fate."

"I thought that was death," said Jordan.

"We Danbridges are stubborn enough to find ways to cheat death from time to time," Max said, smirking. "Fate is another matter."

"So what, this girl you don't even know is your soulmate now?" Darren asked, clearly unimpressed.

"Something like."

Darren let out an exasperated sigh. "I think I've heard enough. Call me when you're sober and ready to discuss an actual solution to this clusterfuck you've made for yourself."

Jordan reluctantly followed him to the door. Leaving under such tense circumstances felt wrong, but staying wasn't an option. She waited until they were on the road to say a word. "I know you're just worried about Max, but why are you so angry at him?"

Darren sighed. "I'm sorry you had to see that, but trust me, this isn't the first time Max and I have gotten into it and it won't be the last."

"Then why are you friends?" she asked, bewildered.

Darren snorted. "It's the people who mean the most to you who piss you off the most. Especially when they're hurting themselves."

"I wouldn't know," Jordan admitted.

He glanced doubtfully at her. "Well, it's true. When someone you don't care about is being a dumbass, you can just laugh. When it's your best friend, you kind of have to say something."

"Max is your best friend?" The idea of someone as stalwart as Darren having a best friend was oddly adorable.

"We never bought the matching bracelets, so it's hardly official."

"What does all that destiny talk have to do with Lauren?" she asked.

Darren rolled his eyes for what seemed like the hundredth time that night. "The Danbridges are a glorified cult. They've bought into all that skull-and-bones stuff. Hell, they've been here long enough, I guess they probably founded that club too. They've always had this weird theory that each person in the family line is destined to be with a specific person."

"A soulmate?" Jordan clarified.

"For lack of a better word, yes. They all believe it to some degree. Even Henry, as shrewd as he is when it comes to matters of the town, is convinced that he was put here on this earth to be with Cindy and her alone."

"That's sweet," Jordan murmured. "Not that I think that's true. I mean, maybe for them, but not for everybody."

He gave her a knowing look. "I'm not saying you can't feel an unexplainable connection to someone. I just think it's more important to choose to be faithful to someone because you love them, not because some supernatural pull prevents you from cheating on them. So did Max, until now."

"Oh," Jordan said, beginning to understand his agitation.

“He’s always hated his family’s superstitions. As long as I’ve known him, he’s been railing against the idea that you’re born into a role and you have to stick to it. It’s just hard to accept that he’d throw all that away after working so hard to build his own life.”

“I mean… I can’t say I disagree with you about the cheating, but how do you know he’s interested in this new girl because of his family? What if it really is destiny?”

“It’s just hard to explain,” he muttered. “The Danbridges have their own brand of woo.”

“They’re not witches, are they?” Jordan felt absurd asking it, since Darren made his disdain for everything supernatural clear, but the way he was talking certainly sounded like it.

He balked. “No. Of course not, they’re… I don’t know *what* they are. I just know it’s crap, and they use it to control every member of the family who starts going his own way. We left cave paintings and blood sacrifice behind for a reason, but they’re still holding onto prehistoric superstitions like a child clinging to its favorite doll."

"Maybe letting go isn't as easy for everyone as it is for you," she said, trying not to take offense at his words. Sometimes Darren could be so sensitive, and others it was like he had no idea how what he was saying might affect anyone else. "Maybe those superstitions as you put it are just more real to some people than they are to everyone else.”

He scoffed. "What Max had with Lauren was real. Anyone who's actually naïve enough to believe some sky god sifted through billions of unremarkable humans to handpick a mate who's perfectly matched to them, *and* just so happened to end up on the same hunk of earth, is an idiot.”

Jordan flinched and her best attempt not to take offense came to a crashing halt. "If that's how you feel about Max, I can't imagine what you think about me."

"Jordan, that's not what I meant," he said quickly, glancing over at her.

"No, it is," she said, keeping her voice steady. "And it's okay. I guess I'd rather know how stupid you think I am."

Darren's knuckles turned white as he gripped the wheel. "You're not stupid. It's different when it comes to you."

"Why?"

"Because you were brainwashed," he said matter-of-factly.

Jordan was quiet for a long moment, sinking deeper into her seat. "I think I liked it better when you just thought I was an idiot."

“You told me yourself that you're not even sure you really believe anything."

"Wishing I didn't and not believing are two different things, Darren."

He pulled into the small lot outside of Mrs. Herrin's home and sat in silence for a moment. "I'm sorry. Like I said, I haven't been in a relationship for years and there's a reason for that. I've never been good at navigating my own feelings, never mind someone else's."

"It doesn't matter," said Jordan. "Just please go easy on Max. What he did was wrong, but you make a better friend than a judge.”

"Jordan, wait," he pleaded, leaning over to stop her when she reached for the door. "Let's talk about this."

"I think we've both said enough for tonight," she murmured. "Like they say, never talk religion and politics.”

He hesitated. "At least let me walk you to the door."

"I can handle the trip,” she said flatly, closing the door behind her before he could argue. "Goodnight, Darren."

"Goodnight…”

Jordan felt him watching her as she walked up toward the house. She could see the headlights in her peripheral vision as he waited, but to her relief, his car passed Mrs. Herrin's lot once she opened the screen door. There was no light under the older woman's door, signaling that she had already gone to bed.

Jordan turned on the lights in her apartment and left her purse and shoes at the door. It was times like this she wished she kept alcohol on hand, but decided it was probably a good thing she didn't. That had always been her mother's go-to solution and yet it had never seemed to solve any of her problems.

She was tempted to fall into bed, dress and all, but finally reached for the back of her zipper and began the arduous process of tugging it down. It

was damn near impossible to reach on her own, but she hadn't anticipated being alone at the end of the evening when she chose it from her closet.

"Let me help with that," came a low, purring voice from behind. As soon as Jordan opened her mouth, a hand closed over it to muffle her scream.

# SEVENTEEN

JORDAN BIT down hard and blood rushed into her mouth. She heard a string of profanities as she lunged for the dining room chair and cracked it over the intruder’s head.

At some point, she was really going to have to set aside her hesitation about dark magic and learn a spell that could Judo flip someone in an instant. Small-town life was not shaping up to be as peaceful as she had imagined.

“Stop!” The voice was much too soft and not nearly low enough to be Darren's. Jordan looked down at the man on her floor and realized it was Hermes, nursing his bleeding palm as he glared at her like *she* was the one who’d broken into his apartment for the second damn time.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she hissed.

“*Me?* Since when are you auditioning for the WWE?”

“You broke into my apartment! You’re lucky your hand is all that got hurt.”

He watched her, smirking as he stood. The bleeding had already stopped and he flashed her a glimpse of his fully healed palm as if just to annoy her. "You and your unlocked doors, silly girl. I take it from the fact that you're home alone on a Friday evening that there's trouble in paradise?"

“That’s none of your business,” Jordan said, folding her arms.

"But I thought we were friends," he crooned. "I told you I'm free on full moons. You should’ve known I'd pay my favorite little witch a visit sooner or later.“

Jordan thought of arguing with his use of the term but decided it was a moot point and flopped down on her bed. She didn't trust him at all, but at

the same time, she couldn't see him as a threat. Her intuition hardly ever seemed logical, and yet she couldn't point to a time when it had been wrong.

Then again, there was a first time for everything.

“I wasn't expecting you until the equinox."

"I thought I'd check in and see if you'd given any thought to my offer," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Have you?"

"I've thought about it," she admitted.

“Do you even remember what it was?”

”You would raise my mother and brother from the dead and, in return, you'd become my familiar and get to be a human whenever you like."

"That's the long and short of it," he said patiently, folding his hands in his lap. "And your answer?"

"Absolutely not."

Hermes appeared offended, but it was hard to tell when he was sincere. “And here I thought it was a compelling offer. Generous, even."

"It was," she said. "That's why I have to turn it down. There are a lot of things about my upbringing that I know now were wrong, but one of the things that's stuck with me is the knowledge that if something seems too good to be true, it is. I also know that ‘familiar’ is just another word for ‘demon.’”

His mouth tilted into that crooked little smile that would have been enticing if it wasn't so damn menacing. "So there *is* a limit to your naiveté. I'm relieved."

"You knew what my answer would be," she realized aloud. "Why did you even bother coming here?"

He shrugged. "I was in the neighborhood. I caught the tail end of your fight with the curmudgeonly yet dreamy doctor and thought you might need someone to talk to. Plus, it never hurts to ask a second time."

Jordan watched him for a long while. "For some odd reason, I actually believe you."

He smiled. "I might be a self-serving entity, Jordan, but I'm not malicious. Unlike some," he said with an accusatory glance at the ceiling. "Believe it or not, I've grown attached to you, Jordan.”

"Why should I believe that? I met you barely two months ago." At least he wasn't still calling her Alyssa.

"As I said when we met, you may not know me, but I've been watching over you since you were young," he said coolly, examining his white nails. "Even a creature like me is capable of forming an attachment over time. I chose you carefully, after all."

"Excuse me for not being flattered, but if you're trying to impress me by claiming to be my guardian angel, you've done a pretty poor job."

Rather than the cutting retort she expected, he gave her a strange, almost sad smile. "Like you said, ‘familiar’ is another word for ‘demon.’ While I make no apologies for what I am, I can promise that I'll never lie to you."

"And why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't," he replied, taking a step forward, "but you do. Way deep down inside that precious little heart of yours, past the God-shaped hole and the quaint little dream of being the doctor's wife, you feel it. The connection. The kinship. The fact that, no matter how many years you spent on your knees, you have more in common with a thing like me than with all those saints who burned in your father's tent that night.”

Jordan flinched as Hermes touched her face, but his nimble fingers dug into her flesh with surprising strength. "You can lie to yourself, little witch, but I never will," he purred, gentling in tone and touch as he caressed her cheek. "I'm not like the other men in your life. I won't exploit you or force you to be anything you're not."

"Darren isn't like that," she said, jerking away. "He loves me the way I am."

"Does he?" Hermes challenged, propping his cheek on his hand. "Or does he just see you as a poor, brainwashed soul to covert? The sermon changes, but preachers are all the same."

Jordan cringed as Hermes echoed Darren’s words. "My love life is none of your business."

He laughed loudly. "Oh, honey, if your love life was a business, you couldn't give away the shares. I'm just concerned about you, that's all. I'd hate to see you escape one hot-headed egoist only to fall into the arms of another on the opposite end of the spectrum."

"That's awfully kind for someone who leaves me threatening phone calls," she muttered. "And I know you were the one who tipped my father off."

Hermes frowned in confusion. "The phone call I'll take credit for. Sometimes my associates get a bit zealous when it comes time to close a deal, but I didn't say anything to your father. Why, did he show up here?"

Jordan eyed him warily, struggling to decide whether he was being sincere or not. His words struck her as genuine, which was something that didn't seem to come easily to him. "You really didn't know?"

The demon stood up straight and raised a hand to his forehead. "Scout's honor. What did he do?"

Jordan frowned. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. Look, if you want me to believe you actually give a damn about me, then back off and tell your 'associates' to do the same."

"Ooh," Hermes said with a low whistle. "The choir girl needs to put a nickel in the swear jar. That vet really must have hurt your feelings."

"It's nothing," she said tersely. "Please just go. It's been a rough night as it is and I don't have the energy to keep up with the witty banter or fend off your advances on my soul."

"Alright," he said, holding his hands up. "Would you let me stay if I promised no more shop talk?"

She hesitated, doubtful of the fact that she actually had a choice in the matter. "Fine," she said, digging through her dresser for a nightgown, "but you're sleeping on the floor."

"Even if I look like this?"

By the time Jordan turned around, there was a wide-eyed white cat in a pile of clothes on the floor. He sauntered over to her, trilling as he rubbed against her legs. Jordan groaned, tossing a blanket over the cat to trap him so she could change in privacy. She was too tired to argue with a feline.

Jordan climbed into bed, and when the cat wriggled closer to her underneath the covers, she pushed him away. After the third time, she gave up and let him nestle into her side, his purrs echoing into her chest. As much as she didn't want to admit it, there was something inexplicably comforting about the creature's presence. She had always wanted a pet when she was younger. Something to dull the loneliness when Ezekiel was away.

Jordan found herself absently stroking the cat's smooth white fur as her eyes fell shut. When they opened hours later, Hermes was gone. She sat up quickly before reminding herself that it didn't matter if he had run off. He

certainly wasn't helpless, even if he was more tolerable in his cute and fuzzy form.

It took a moment for her bleary eyes to make sense of her surroundings. Somehow, she was no longer in her room at all. In fact, judging from the way the bed rocked and swayed, she doubted she was even on land.

Jordan got to her feet, holding her arms out to steady herself. “Hermes,” she hissed into the darkness, sure this was somehow his doing. The musty stench of the cabin and the deadness of the air were too real to be a dream.

Jordan looked around for any sign of where she was or at least where she was going. There was a boarding pass in the nightstand drawer that had the name Adam Beltran printed in big blocky letters, but she’d barely put it down before the door flew open. A boy with tousled dark hair appeared in the doorway, his gray eyes so wide Jordan was sure he recognized that she wasn't supposed to be there. He couldn't have been a day over seventeen, but his evident malnourishment might have been making him seem younger than he really was.

"I'm sorry," she began. "I don't know how I got in here."

He rushed at her and she raised her hands to shield her face, but he passed right through her, causing her body to flicker like a screen projection interrupted by a passing object. Jordan stared down at herself, trying to sort out which one of them was the ghost. The way his knees thudded when they hit the cabin floor didn't bode well for her corporeality.

The boy withdrew a small pocketknife from his tattered slacks and sliced open his lifeline. With his right hand, he dipped his fingers into the pooling blood and began painting something on the floor. It didn't take long for Jordan to recognize it as a sigil. She frowned as the lines and curves took on a vaguely familiar shape, but the more her mind fought to place it, the more it felt like she was pushing against a wall.

The boy leaned over his finished work, his shoulders sunken with exhaustion. "I know you can hear me," he said hoarsely. "Please, tell me what to do.  I know you're the one sending me these visions. There has to be a reason you led me to this ship. Why show me that all these people are going to die if there's nothing I can do to stop it?"

No answer came in reply to the boy's desperate plea. The sigil remained nothing but a bloody stain on the floor and the lad's request went unheard. His shoulders heaved and tears that seemed to have been held in for a long time began to fall, washing away bits of his rudimentary work.

All at once, a brilliant white light emanated from the corner and drowned out nearly everything else in the room. Jordan shielded her eyes, but it did nothing to block out the all-encompassing light. No less than a dozen glowing orbs hovered in the middle of the room and spun around in interlocking rings. A shrill sound made it impossible to hear the ship's creaks and groans. Jordan didn't need to see the orbs clearly to know they were eyes. She had seen them once before. Her heart filled with terror on the boy's behalf, but there was no fear in his eyes as he turned to face the monster hovering within the rings.

The look on the young man's face was nothing short of adoration as he reached out to touch the angel and face his death.

# EIGHTEEN

JORDAN WOKE to the sound of her own screams, but a cool hand clamped over her mouth, muffling them. She found herself staring into those strange green cat eyes as Hermes looked down at her, fully human, and a veil of white hair cascaded down to form an intimate shroud around them both.

The demon lifted a slender finger to his lips. Jordan nodded feebly and his hand slowly uncovered her mouth. She lay beneath him, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. She could still feel the dream clawing at her and she could still smell the dank ship, even if the scent was fading into the fresh green aroma of the plants that filled her apartment.

"That must have been some nightmare," Hermes said, rolling away from her. He got out of bed and, to Jordan's relief, pulled on the pants he had abandoned after shifting into his feline form.

Jordan sat up, still panting but feeling less like her heart was going to explode in her chest with the very next beat. "It wasn't a nightmare," she said, throwing the covers off. "It was a vision. I think."

"I wouldn't be surprised. You used a lot of power between healing yours truly and Stu Herbert," Hermes said thoughtfully. "Your other abilities should be coming to the surface."

Jordan leaned forward, rubbing her temples in an attempt to erase the shrill ringing in her ears. "Please, I don't want to talk about any of that right now."

"As you wish," he said, sitting next to her on the edge of the bed. "What did you see that made you scream?"

"A monster," she said through gritted teeth.

"A monster?" He chuckled. "You'll have to be more specific. Werewolf, demon, chupacabra?"

"An angel," she said, giving him a warning look just in case he thought of making a quip.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to be as easily amused as usual. "What's so bad about an angel?"

"Not just any angel," she muttered.

His eyes widened. "The one you saw as a child?"

Jordan nodded.

"Ah. I can see how that would be unsettling."

"It wasn't just that. He was about to do it again," she murmured, hugging her knees to her chest. "I could feel it."

"Do what again?"

"He was going to kill all those people," she replied quietly. "There was a ship, and a boy. He summoned the angel with a sigil to ask for help, but I'm sure it was just using him like it used me."

"Did you see the angel?" he asked, frowning.

She hesitated. "No, it was too bright. I saw the rings of eyes, though."

“Good. An angel can be dangerous to behold in its true form, even if it is just a dream. An angel rarely shows grace and allows a human to look upon it without dying or going mad.”

“Why would they do that?"

He shrugged. "There are a few reasons. Usually it's because the angel has a message to deliver to a special human--a prophet."

"And the other reasons?" she asked warily.

“The same reason humans tell people their darkest secrets, I suppose. Vulnerability. Intimacy."

She shuddered. "I don't know why anyone would want to be intimate with one of them."

Hermes gave her a knowing smile. "Angels have their charms, you know."

"Yeah, I'm sure that makes it a lot easier to manipulate us."

"Yes," he said carefully, "but angels can love, too. Guardian angels, for example.”

She scoffed. "Mine is either dead or drunk."

"Look on the bright side. At least you have a guardian *demon* to pick up some of the slack."

Jordan gave him a look. "Right, because demons are known for their altruism."

"It's not altruism. You're important to me for the same reason you were important to the angel your father was working with," he said. He must have caught sight of her widening eyes, because he added, "Yes, I know who it is, and no, I won't tell you."

"I thought you wouldn't lie to me," she said dryly.

"There's a difference between lying and not telling you things," he said, lightly tapping the tip of her nose. "The less you know the better, especially without being under the protection of a contract."

"Nice sales tactic."

He grinned. "I'd be happy to sweeten the deal if revenge against the angel you saw in your vision is what you're after."

Jordan hesitated. "I wouldn't say it's revenge, but after what I saw, I'm sure that the fire from my childhood wasn't an isolated incident."

"You think it was the same angel?”

"I do," she said, staring down at her hands. "The vision was set in the past, but I have no doubt that he'll do it again. Maybe next time I can stop it."

"You'll need power if that's the case," Hermes said pointedly.

"Mhm. And I bet you know exactly where I can find it."

He shrugged innocently. "My offer still stands."

"No offense, but making a deal with the devil isn't exactly how I want to solve my angel problems."

"The devil?" He pressed a hand against his chest. "You wound me."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Cat demon of questionable origins, then. Same difference."

"That does have a certain ring to it," he mused, glancing out the window at the rising sun. "If you don't want my help, how do you plan to stop the angel? Even if there is a pattern of tragedy, you don't know when or where it'll happen again."

"Research, I guess," she murmured. "I think I know the name of the boy in the dream. Adam Beltran. I figure I'll start from there."

"Adam is a pretty common name."

"I know, but he was on a ship where a lot of people died," she said. "I also know there was no electricity at the time, so that narrows it down a bit

more. Unless you're offering your investigative services free of charge, that's the best I can do."

He smirked. "Nothing in life is free. You know that."

Jordan sighed, climbing out of bed. She didn't have anywhere to be, but going back to sleep after a dream like that was a lost cause.

Hermes wandered over and began sifting through her closet with a grimace. “Why does everything in here look like it was curated for a special ‘day at the library’ collection?” He grabbed a corduroy skirt and a light sweater, tossing them on the bed in disgust. “The only remotely passable outfit. When you inevitably cave and become my witch, we're going to have to go shopping."

Jordan picked up the clothes and when she glanced back, she saw that Hermes had already averted his eyes. "You're weirdly chivalrous, you know," she said, deciding to test him. She kept him in her peripheral vision as she changed quickly, but he never once tried to steal a peek.

Maybe it was disinterest more than chivalry, but either way she was relieved.

"When you've been around as long as I have, a few of the old fashioned virtues stick," he said, finally looking her over. "Careful, Nancy. If Ned sees you in anything above the knee he just might have a heart attack."

Jordan leaned against the wall, watching him curiously. “You’re making Nancy Drew references now?” she asked. He just grinned. “I have a strange question for you. Purely academic."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You want me to settle that fight with your boyfriend, don't you?"

Jordan bit her lip, realizing she had been caught. "It's not like he'd trust you as a source even if I told him about you. I'm just curious since you're a powerful ancient demon and all that."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. I'm listening."

"Do *you* believe in soulmates?"

"Of course," he said without hesitation. "But that doesn't mean everyone has one, or that you're guaranteed to be united with yours in any given life. Some people even have more than one."

Jordan blinked. "How does that work?"

"It often doesn't. Is that all you wanted to know?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly.

"You don't seem satisfied with the answer. Maybe you were hoping I'd tell you that every soul in the world is paired up to a perfect match and all it takes is finding your better half to achieve your happily ever after?" he asked dryly.

"I was not."

"Of course you were," he purred. "That's what everyone hopes for secretly, even if they won't admit it. Even Darren. In fact, it's usually the people who long for a fairy tale ending the most who tell themselves it isn't possible. Sometimes it's easier to accept that something doesn't exist than it is to know that it's real and just outside your grasp."

"I guess so…”

"Buck up, kiddo," said Hermes, rising to his full height as he lightly tapped her chin with his fist. "Just because not everyone gets a happy ending doesn't mean you won't."

Jordan's breath caught in her throat as she stared up at him. Sometimes he seemed as benign as the house cat he so often resembled, but others his otherworldly nature was evident. "How do I know when I've found it, then?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, I reserve the spoilers for my subscribers."

She couldn't help but smile. "You make a hard sale, Hermes.”

"Honey, you have no idea."

Jordan picked her purse up off the hook by the door and lingered for a moment. "I'll see you again next month for the final pitch, won't I?"

"Count on it," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets as he watched her from the center of the room.

"Well, just lock up before you go," she said, slightly reluctant to leave him alone in her apartment but even more reluctant to stay.

"I'll do my best, but no promises," he called after her. "I do have a habit of leaving doors open."

# NINETEEN

AFTER AVOIDING Darren in town and ignoring his phone calls for a couple of days, Jordan had finally worked up the courage to go to his office. She couldn’t tell him about the dream, of course, or her suspicion that it was somehow connected to the tragedy in her own childhood. He would just take it as the delusion of a poor, brainwashed girl and give her that pitying look she knew all too well.

Jordan knew avoiding Darren was childish, but she had never been in a relationship before and couldn't settle on what she would say to him when she saw him. Her encounter with Hermes was still fresh in her mind and whenever she thought about the supernatural chaos she was pulling Darren into with her very existence, it made her even more uncertain about making amends.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled open the door to Darren's clinic and the bell rang overhead. She still didn't know what she was going to say to him, but she figured that apologizing was the only place to start.

The lobby was empty, but she could hear voices from behind one of the closed exam room doors. A moment later, Darren stepped out wearing the same lab coat he had put on during their fateful encounter so many months ago.

"Jordan?" His face lit up with simultaneous relief and concern and when he pulled her into his arms without hesitation, Jordan felt like the weight of her guilt might crush her if his embrace didn't. "My God, you don't know how worried I was." He pulled away but held her by the shoulders, looking her over. "What happened? Why haven't you answered any of my calls?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured, unable to meet his eyes. "I told Mrs. Herrin to let you know I was fine."

"She did, but I was still worried," he said, frowning. "I understand why you're upset. I was an asshole the last time we talked, but --"

“It’s okay. It wasn’t just that. I’ve been in a weird place lately,” she admitted.

"Dr. St. Clair?" a woman called from inside the exam room. "Lulu is going to have another panic attack if you keep us waiting any longer!”

"Just a second," he called gruffly, turning back to Jordan. He squeezed her hands. "I have to finish up with this patient, but please don't go anywhere," he said, fumbling in his pocket. He pulled his keys out and placed them in her hand. "Go up to my apartment and wait, I'll be done in twenty minutes tops. We'll talk then."

“Okay,” Jordan said, pocketing the keys. ”Take your time."

Darren reluctantly walked back towards the exam room without taking his eyes off of her. "Don't go anywhere," he ordered.

"I won't," she promised, smiling a little. His gruffness was starting to grow on her.

Hell, it already had.

Once he had gone back into the room, she let out the breath she’d been holding and trudged up the stairs. Guilt had been a staple in Jordan's upbringing, but she had never felt quite as low as she had the moment she had made the mistake of meeting Darren's worried gaze.

When she unlocked the door, his apartment was in more than its usual state of disarray. She began picking the dirty laundry up off the floor to keep herself occupied while she used the few moments she had to come up with an adequate apology. Words didn't seem to suffice, not after she had seen how deeply her absence had affected him. Somehow, despite his words of love and affirmation, it hadn't sunk in until that moment that he meant them.

He really loved her. Why, Jordan couldn't even begin to imagine, but the truth had been as plain as the concern on his face.

Jordan carried the laundry into Darren's bedroom and loaded it into the empty hamper he seemed to have forgotten existed. She was about to leave the room when something on his bed caught her eye. Nestled in the midst of the tousled blankets was an envelope. Her name was written in all too familiar font on the front.

With a trembling hand, Jordan reached out for the envelope. She broke the red seal marked with the initial B. It wasn't the way her father usually sealed his letters, but she wouldn't have put it past him to use an element of dramatic flair.

Sure enough, the letter inside was in his handwriting. It was short and to the point, but no less chilling for its brevity.

*Dearest Alyssa,*

*I hear your boyfriend thinks he can take me, but how do you think he'll fare against my friend?*

*Love,*

*Daddy*

Jordan's head spun until the words were nothing but a blur. She crumpled the paper and ripped it until it was nothing but confetti, tossing the pieces in the trash. She turned and stalked straight for the front door just as Darren opened it.

"Jordan?" His expression fell. "Where were you going? Wait, are you crying? I know my place is kind of a mess, but --"

"Coming here was a mistake," she said, her voice hoarse with dread of the words she was about to speak. "I just didn't want to do this over the phone."

Darren frowned and she could see the realization wash over him. "Jordan, please. I said I was sorry. I know I was a jerk --"

"It's not that," she snapped, knowing that at this point, the only way to keep him safe was to push him away like she should have from the beginning. "You were right, Darren. That's why I was upset, not because you hurt my feelings. This whole time we've both been thinking we could get past the differences between us, but we can't. It was one thing when we were just experimenting, but now that things are getting serious, I just don't see how this is going to work."

"Is this because I said I wanted to marry you?" he asked, taking a step forward. "Because if things are moving too fast, we can slow down. I never would have brought that up if I hadn't thought we were on the same page."

"It's not just that," she said, folding her arms to hide the fact that her hands were still shaking from the letter. "No matter how slowly we move, the only place this thing between us can go is off a cliff."

He looked like she had punched him in the stomach and Jordan had to look away. "I'm sorry, Darren, but you know it's the truth. I'm a runaway

preacher's kid who dabbles in witchcraft and you're practically the poster boy for normalcy. I can't stay in one town for a year and we both know you'll never leave."

He winced and for a moment, anger overtook the confusion on his face. Jordan latched onto it and went in for the kill. Anger was easier to deal with than pain. Anger she was used to. Anger would make sure he didn't pursue her. It would keep him safe.

"Ouch," he muttered.

"You know I'm right, Darren," she said, managing to overcome the tremor in her voice. "I've spent most of my life locked up like a caged bird. You're never going to leave this town, and I would never ask you to. If I stay here, I'm just going to end up resenting you."

He worked his jaw like he was struggling to speak. Finally, he rasped, "I'm sorry. I had no idea I bored you so much."

Jordan found that it took as much effort to keep her knees from buckling as it took to keep herself from recanting every hurtful word she had said and begging for his forgiveness. The only thing that gave her strength was the knowledge that if she did take it back, she was condemning him and very likely the entire town he loved so much to the same fate that had befallen her mother and Ezekiel.

"I'm just being honest, Darren," she said, swallowing hard. "You deserve that. You deserve a nice, sane, normal woman who can live beside you in this town and give you the life you've always wanted. The marriage, the family, the stability. You deserve someone who sees this town and the life you can give her as a gift, not a prison."

"Prison?" he asked hoarsely. He moved forward and Jordan flinched. When he realized the reason for her reaction, he froze and the last trace of his anger vanished. "You really think I would hurt you, after everything we've been through together?"

Jordan couldn't find the voice to answer or the strength to meet his gaze. "You're a man, Darren," she said quietly. "At the end of the day, no matter what you do or don’t believe in, you're all the same."

His silence was so loud she wished he would scream at her, curse her or say something, anything to break it. Instead, he opened the door and stepped aside.

"Go, then," he said gruffly.

Jordan took a step forward but Darren caught her arm. When she turned to face him, his usually cold gray eyes were filled with more pain than she had thought possible. "Unlike your father, I'm not going to stop you from leaving. You can tell yourself I'm like him if it makes you feel better, but I love you enough not to stand in your way. Remember that."

Before Jordan could reply, Darren took a step back and she found herself on the other side of the threshold. Tears slipped down her cheek and she forced herself to move away from him even though it felt like a magnet was drawing her back. "Goodbye, Darren."

His eyes narrowed. "Goodbye, Jordan," he said stiffly before closing the door.

Jordan wandered out of Darren's building and made it to the front steps before she broke down. To her relief, it was dark and no one was around to see her crumble.

# TWENTY

THE REMAINING WEEK until the festival flew by. At first, Jordan had made herself a recluse in fear of running into Darren, but her plants would need more food sooner or later and Mrs. Herrin had asked her to make a run to the store. To her relief, no one in town seemed to know about the breakup. If they did, at least they were being respectful by not bringing it up.

Jordan realized that she had been holding out hope for the very encounter she had sought to avoid when she made it through the grocery store checkout line without catching sight of Darren. The lights in his clinic were off when she allowed herself a stray glance. Maybe he wasn't feeling well.

She quickly chided herself for the impulse to run over and see if he needed anything. Making soup and fluffing pillows was girlfriend territory and she wasn't that. Not anymore. If she did allow herself to get close to Darren again, Jordan knew that a worse fate than the common cold would befall him.

In fact, she had made all but the final preparations to leave town that night after the festival. The short but pointed letter's warning may have been shredded into a thousand pieces, but it was still whole and legible in her mind.

Jordan wandered back in the direction of Mrs. Herrin's house to deliver the groceries and change into her costume for the festival. She didn't want to leave Cindy in the lurch, but if she was being honest with herself, staying for the festival was just a half-assed excuse to put off leaving Cold Creek for as long as possible. After that night, she could no longer justify her

presence in the small town or anywhere near Darren. Hopefully the silver lining would be that she managed to avoid Hermes and his last-ditch sales pitch by making a surprise exit.

"Jordan!" A familiar voice called to her from behind. Jordan turned to see Chase Wilde jogging to meet her. She gave him a tired smile and didn't have the energy to make it convincing. "I thought it was you. You've been a scarce commodity lately--you and Daren both."

"We've both been busy," she said, shifting the groceries to her other arm. Before she could protest, he took them from her.

"I'll help you with that," he offered, setting off down the path without waiting for her to accept.

"Thanks, but you don’t have to keep being my grocery delivery service.”

"I'd hardly be able to call myself a gentleman if I let a beautiful young lady carry a heavy parcel," he said with a wink.

Jordan stared at him for a moment. How could someone so plastic have such convincing moments of warmth? If the night of Cindy's welcome party hadn't been burned into her mind, she might not have believed he was the same person.

"So," he said, breaking into her thoughts, "how is Darren?"

"He's good," she said quickly, hoping he wouldn't notice the way her voice strained whenever she spoke of him. "Like I said, he's just been busy. Lots of dogs to, um, shave."

She cringed. *Shave, Jordan?*

He cocked his head. "I suppose it is shedding season."

"Do you have any pets?" she asked, hoping to move him away from the topic of Darren. "You seem like the golden retriever type."

"No," he said slowly, "I'm allergic to dogs and just a tad OCD. My mother has one, though.”

"What about cats? They're pretty clean," she murmured, thinking she knew one who would probably be all too eager to spend an evening in Chase’s lap. Her cheeks grew warm at the thought that was a bit too intriguing.

Chase wrinkled his nose. "Let's just say I've had some bad experiences with cats."

Jordan's mind drifted back to Darren's warning about the lawyer's past and she tried not to wonder whether it had been a bad experience for him or

for the cat. Maybe it was because she was surrounded by dangers of a supernatural nature, or simply the fact that she already had more confirmed bodies on her conscience than the rumors could pin on Chase, but avoiding him because of something that might not be true seemed like a moot point. Maybe she was just as naive as Hermes seemed to think.

Maybe Chase sensed it and that was why he followed her around like a lost puppy every chance he got. He was destined to be disappointed come morning, when she skipped town, but she was sure he'd get over his inexplicable infatuation as quickly as it had developed.

"What about you?" he asked. "Other than Darren, do you have any pets?"

She smiled a little as the house came into view. "There's a stray cat who shows up from time to time, but I try not to encourage him. I think he considers me the pet, though."

"Ah," he said knowingly, coming to a stop in front of the door. He glanced up warily at the house. "I'd carry these in for you, but Mrs. Herrin isn't really a fan of mine. She'd probably set the dogs on me."

"The police?" Jordan asked, frowning.

Chase gave her a placid smile. "You're kind to pretend you haven't heard the rumors about me, but there's no need for pretense. Not when our time is so limited."

"Limited?" Her heart lurched. Did he know?

"It's only a matter of time before Darren comes to his senses and whisks you away from this town, I mean," he said smoothly, passing her the groceries. "He's never been the brightest star in the sky, but if he has half a brain in that over-inflated head of his you'll have a ring on your finger by Thanksgiving."

Jordan's face warmed again and her relief that he hadn't seen through her plans to leave in secret was dampened by the sadness in his voice. For a moment, Chase Wilde had transformed from a mannequin to a man again. "That's very sweet, but I don't think Darren is going anywhere and I don't think there's going to be a ring anytime soon. We broke up."

"Oh?" He asked in half-hearted disappointment. "I suppose I gave my high school rival too much credit."

"Wait," said Jordan, emboldened by her impending getaway. "There's something I need to ask you."

Chase watched her patiently and she couldn't escape the feeling that he knew exactly what it was. "For you, Jordan, I'm an open book."

She hesitated. Well, what did it matter? She was never going to see him again anyway. "Are the rumors true?"

"That depends," he said calmly. "Are you referring to the rumors about my sexuality or the ones about how I killed my high school girlfriend in cold blood and made the body disappear?"

She jolted, not expecting him to put it so bluntly. Before she could answer, he gave her a tired smile and added, "Only in small-town America can you simultaneously be gay *and* a lady killer."

"I'm sorry people are so…presumptuous," she mumbled, already feeling awful for adding to the scrutiny.

"Don't be. I'm not gay, but there's no reason to take it as an insult. As for the other rumor, no, I didn't kill Jessica, but I was hardly a model teenager and I can't say I blame anyone for thinking it. To say I was a different person back then would be putting it mildly."

"I can't imagine what it's like, knowing everyone thinks that," she said, feeling even worse.

"What do you think, Jordan?" he asked softly, his eyes searching hers with great intent as he leaned in so close she could feel the friction between their auras. Jordan forced herself to hold his gaze. Sometimes he was so intimidating, and it was obvious he wasn't even aware of it, or of the quiet, restless energy that emanated from him. She wondered if that was half the reason everyone was so wary around him, even if they weren't quite aware of it, either.

"I don't think you're capable of murderer," she answered. "Not by a long shot."

His searching gaze intensified and he frowned when he obviously didn't find what he was looking for. "How can you say that? You don't know me. All you know are the rumors."

Now she was the one daring him to break eye contact. "Call it intuition."

He chuckled. "That's not a reliable source when it comes to dealing with a potential murderer."

"Maybe not," she agreed, "but you're not a murderer all the same. I can tell."

"How?" he demanded.

Jordan finally pulled away from him, looking down at the ground. "Because I am," she murmured.

Shock registered on his elegant features for a moment before it faded. Before he could ask any clarifying questions, Jordan shifted her bag to her hip and unlocked the screen door. "Goodnight, Chase. I can't say I understand why you stick around this place, but I hope you have better luck starting over here than I did."

For a moment, he didn't seem to know how to respond. When he finally did, all he said was, "Goodnight, Jordan. And good luck to you."

Jordan slipped inside without waiting to see if he had left. Mrs. Herrin's apartment was empty when she entered it, so Jordan put the groceries away and took her time before going upstairs to change. To her relief, there was no sign of the white cat and her windows were closed, but she locked them all for good measure. She grabbed the yellow envelope she had taken from the bank along with the apology letter she had written Mrs. Herrin and left them both on the coffee table for her to find in the morning. The letter explained that she was leaving a few months' rent in order to cover for the time it would take to find another tenant.

Jordan was worried that if she stayed long enough to say goodbye the absurdly logical old woman just might be able to talk her out of leaving at all. Mrs. Herrin couldn't have any idea of the trouble that would come down on her and the entire town if Jordan stayed.

The sooner she left, the better, but there was still one thing she had to do before that. Everyone was already going to think she was a flake for leaving, but Cindy had been so kind to her that she just didn't feel right about leaving her in the lurch.

# TWENTY-ONE

AS JORDAN PULLED into the makeshift parking lot at the fairgrounds there were already dozens of other cars and people milling about outside the large white tents. There was a Ferris wheel, a teacup ride for the children and several game booths set up so teenage boys could blow their allowances on fruitless attempts to impress their girlfriends. The smell of funnel cake filled the air, competing with the greasier fare offered by the other food stands.

Jordan had been to a fair once before, one even larger than the Autumn Equinox Festival. Her father had set up a booth to convert the sinners indulging in carnal pursuits and she had been the one handing out pamphlets. This time she would be the one reading palms. The smile that spread across her face as she thought of what her mother would say was short-lived when she spotted a man who looked a bit like Darren from a distance. Of course it wasn't him, but she resented the way her heart surged with hope that it was.

Jordan doubted Darren was the festival going type, but she decided to minimize her chances of running into him again and headed quickly to her tent. Once she found it, she lugged her duffel bag inside and looked around. It was already set up with her own dressing table and another table out front that had been decorated to resemble a fortuneteller's parlor. The cloth had a cheesy spirit board print on it and there were out-of-place Mardi Gras beads everywhere, but the Tibetan incense holders were a nice touch. She lit a couple of sticks, deciding to get into the mood while she was at it. It wouldn't be the first time she had exploited her "gifts" through

showmanship, but she had already made a promise to herself that it would be the last and decided to have some fun while she was at it.

Besides, she reasoned, fortunetelling was more about reading someone's mind than their spirit and that was easily enough accomplished without calling upon any supernatural abilities. She had learned at a young age that people gave away more than they ever realized through their voice and their body language.

Jordan pulled a small wooden box from her duffel bag and placed it on the table. She brushed her fingertips over the smooth lines of the tree on the lid, painstakingly carved by hands that had made up for their lack of precision with love. It had been her thirteenth birthday present from Ezekiel, and the last gift she would ever receive from him.

Inside the box was a standard deck of Tarot cards. She knew now that they could easily be purchased online for little more than the cost of a book, but Ezekiel had risked more to find those cards for her than any smuggler of gold or gems. The deck was worn and well-loved from countless late-night divination sessions hidden under the covers.

Ezekiel had always been fascinated by the very gifts that scared Jordan most. In the end, their father had been right about one thing. Ezekiel had certainly paid the price for his interest in the occult. He wouldn't have been there the night of the fire if he hadn't been so fascinated with her power.

Jordan was jolted from her memories as two volunteers peeled back the curtains. "Oh good," Cindy cried, walking toward the booth. "You're already dressed and set up, and don't you just look adorable?" she gushed, tucking the clipboard she was carrying underneath one arm.

Jordan gave her a patient smile, even though the camp was already wearing on her patience. The sooner the fair was over, the better. “You look great, too. And less theatrical.”

"Oh, here," Cindy interrupted, setting a metal box down on the table. It looked out of place amid the array of exotic colors and fabrics. "They're posting the sign out front, but it's ten dollars for a palm reading and twenty for tarot. Remember to tell them it's for charity!"

"I don't really have any experience reading palms," Jordan warned her for what seemed like the twentieth time.

"Well, of course you don't," Cindy scoffed. "The bearded lady wears a stick-on, but tonight is the autumn equinox," she said in a spooky voice.

"Anything is possible when the veil between the living and the spirit world is thin."

"So we're fleecing people under the guise of cosmological forces," Jordan muttered. She had assumed the readings would at least be free.

"Yes, but we're fleecing them for charity," Cindy replied in a singsong voice. "Don't worry so much, you'll be done by nine."

Jordan sighed. "Okay, I guess I can handle it."

"Sure you can, and remember," she said, leaning in, "have fun! You're twenty-four, it wouldn't kill you to act like it sometimes."

It felt more like fifty-four, but Cindy had a point. “I’ll do my best."

"Text me if you need anything, I'll be in the admin trailer most of the night," Cindy said, already navigating the gravel lot in her stilettos. Jordan wasn't sure how she managed to walk in them at all without snapping an ankle.

As soon as the sign was placed, the booth began to draw attention. A small line formed and Jordan took a deep breath before greeting her first customer. How was a fortune teller supposed to talk, anyway?

"Good evening," she said stiffly to the first group that approached. "Can I interest you in a glimpse of the future?"

Nearly two hours and a few dozen BS fortunes later, Jordan had become a master in the art of reading people, but she wasn't sure if she was any better at reading the cards. She was starting to think that clairvoyance wasn't like riding a bicycle, after all. Maybe Hermes was right and she had suppressed her magical abilities for so long that they were starting to atrophy.

The crowd had long since died down with competition from the food stands, the live band that was performing its final set and the modest selection of rides, but Jordan still had a customer every few minutes.

At least Cindy would be pleased with how full the cash box was. A small group of teenagers nearly passed by the booth before one of the girls pointed in Jordan's direction and waved the others over to join her.

"Good evening," Jordan said with a well-practiced air of mystery. The cornier the better in the eyes of the festival goers. "Shall I consult the spirit world for you this evening?"

"Ben wants to get his palm read," said a tall brunette as she approached the stall, grinning impishly at the shorter boy beside her.

"I do not," Ben mumbled, flipping his long hair out of his eyes. Jordan always wondered how the teenagers with that hairstyle managed to see.

"C'mon, Ben," chided the red-haired girl beside him, keeping her eyes locked on her phone. "Don't be a loser, just let her read your hand."

Ben sighed and fished a ten-dollar bill out of his pocket. Jordan took it with no small amount of shame and placed it into the money box. "Thank you for your donation," she said, holding up her palms. The boy reluctantly held out his right hand.

"Yes, I see good things in your future," Jordan mumbled, relieved that the teenagers didn't seem to be taking her seriously at all. "You'll have good success in your education and your career if you work hard," she said, glancing at the band patches sewn onto his knapsack. "I also see music in your future… are you perhaps in a band?"

His eyes widened slightly. "I was thinking about starting one with my friends, actually. How'd you know that?"

"The spirits see many things," she said, holding in a chuckle. "Just don't quit school--or date anyone in the band, I hear that rarely works out."

"Kara, you do it," he said, nudging the girl who had quite literally forced his hand.

Kara rolled her eyes. "Palm readings are lame. I want her to use the cards," she said, stuffing a twenty into the box.

Jordan looked down at her deck and began to lay out a basic spread for the girl. She hadn't worked her cards in years, not since Ezekiel's death. Part of her hoped she didn't still have it in her.

"Your present is represented by the Hierophant," she said, tapping the top card in the spread. "You've begun some new work, adopted a new system of belief, maybe."

Kara frowned. "Well, I did just start a cleanse yesterday morning. Hey, that's pretty good."

Jordan flipped over the bottom card. "This card is the Seven of Swords. It represents romantic distress of some kind in your past. Perhaps infidelity?"

Kara's eyes widened and she looked over at Phone Girl. "Oh my God, Ellie, she's talking about Jason. Cheating asshole," she muttered. "Go on, what does it say about my future?"

Jordan flipped the last card, smiling a bit. "The Two of Cups. It symbolizes love, happiness, and the eternal union between two people.

You'll find happiness with someone very close to you."

Ben was staring intently at the ground and Kara was obviously trying to hide her smile. "Knew it," she mouthed, glancing back at Ellie. "Come on, El, you have to do it. She's the real deal."

The real deal? It was all Jordan could do to keep from laughing. If the poor girl only knew. Maybe she was the real deal, or at least had been at one time, but the card in the future position, even though it was the only one anyone really cared about, was hardly a guarantee. The future wasn't set, any decent precog knew that. Whatever the card promised, whether fortune or despair, the recipient was the one who chose its meaning in the end and brought it to fruition.

"Nah," said Ellie, tapping away at her phone, "I don't do cards."

"So get a palm reading," said Ben. Jordan realized she had created a true believer and wasn't sure how she felt about it.

"Ugh, fine," Ellie muttered, keeping her phone in one hand as she shoved a ten into the box and thrust her other hand in Jordan's general direction.

Jordan hesitated as Ellie continued to text, but she waved her hand over the girl's upturned palm and decided to carry on with the show. "Ah, yes," she murmured, placing her hand underneath Ellie's. "I see a bright future ahead of you. College and an exciting career."

Ellie yawned.

Jordan trailed a finger along Ellie’s lifeline, prepared to improvise some cautionary warning about living in the present when a blinding flash of light took her off guard. Jordan gasped sharply as her hand spasmed, gripping the girl's wrist involuntarily. Ellie panicked and tried in vain to pull her hand out of Jordan's grasp.

The blinking lights of the festival rides and attractions went black and gave way to a hallucination of celluloid film playing a series of clips, each one starring Ellie at some point in her life. Some clips were innocuous, mere glimpses of summers spent playing underneath the sprinkler and searching the grass for frogs, but there was one glimpse that was unlike the rest.

The vision disappeared as quickly as it had come and Ellie finally succeeded at pulling her hand away. "What the hell," she shrieked, garnering the attention of some passersby across the gravel lot. Her phone hit the rocks with a crunch. "That hurt, you freak!"

Jordan stared at Ellie and all three teenagers stared back at her. It took her a moment to catch her breath. "Your brother," she choked, looking at Ben. "He was sick."

Ellie was still glaring as she rubbed her head. "What are you talking about?"

"Wait," said Kara. "What do you mean he was sick?"

"When you were younger," Jordan continued, her breath caught in her throat. "You were in the hospital with your parents. You were almost too young to remember, but you helped your mom pick out a stuffed lizard in the gift shop, because it looked like --"

"Godzilla," Ben interrupted, staring at Jordan like he was seeing a ghost. "I was obsessed with old monster movies and they thought it would make me feel better."

"What?" Kara asked, folding her arms. "What's she talking about, Ben?"

"He was a mutant," Ben continued, ignoring her. "He was bombed and poisoned by radiation, but it made him bigger and stronger. It helped him fight the other monsters. My dad told me about it because he thought it would help me feel better about the radiation treatments."

"You never told me you had cancer," Kara said, clearly hurt.

"That's because I don't like to talk about it," he murmured, his eyes locked on Jordan. "How did you know that?"

Jordan looked away. She didn't know how to answer that without causing an even bigger spectacle.

"Oh my God," muttered Kara. "It's supposed to be fake. You're not actually supposed to be able to do this shit."

"I'm sorry," said Jordan. Kara couldn't possibly know how much she meant it.

"Wait," said Ellie after picking her phone up off the gravel. "You were reading my palm, not his. Why didn't that come up before?"

The other two watched her in silent expectation. Jordan gulped. This had always been the part she hated the most. "Because the vision wasn't about Ben," she said softly, looking up at Ellie with an apologetic gaze. "It was about you."

The girl blinked back the moisture forming in her eyes. "What? No, you're full of shit!”

"I'm so sorry," she murmured. "But you need to see a doctor as soon as possible. I think the cancer he had back then was genetic."

Ellie covered her mouth to stifle a gasp and turned away. Kara rushed to her side. "Come on, El, this is bullshit," Kara said in a barely convincing tone. "Don't listen."

Ben kept his eyes on Jordan the entire time. "What else did you see?" he asked. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Come on, Ben," Kara scolded.

"Just give me a minute," he snapped.

Kara shot him a scathing look as she led Ellie away from the tent.

"Well?" he insisted, taking another bill out of his wallet and slamming it on the table. "Is my sister gonna be okay or not?"

Jordan slid the bill back to him. "I don't know," she said quietly. "I only saw the past and the present. All I know is that her cancer is more aggressive than yours was. You need to convince her to get checked out as soon as possible."

Ben grabbed a handful of his hair and turned away from her for a moment. "Fuck," he muttered underneath his breath. "She's always taking aspirin for headaches. I should have said something before."

"You can't blame yourself, and you can't change the past," Jordan said gently. "All you can do is try to change the future."

Ben took a deep breath and watched her for a long moment. "This is fucked up, you know that?"

“I know,” Jordan assured him. “I don't suppose I could convince you to keep this quiet?"

He gave her an incredulous look and she sighed. "Doesn't matter anyway. I won't be here long enough for it to matter."

Ben glanced back at Kara, who was still consoling Ellie. It seemed to be working. "You should get back to them," said Jordan.

Ben clenched his jaw and seemed to want to say something else, but he turned away.

"Wait," called Jordan.

The boy stopped and turned around with a wary look. "Yeah?"

"She loves you," said Jordan, trying to hide the quiver in her voice. "Maybe she doesn't say it a lot, but she does. The little girl who used to call you the best big brother in the whole world is still in there, and she's going to need you now more than ever."

Ben frowned and muttered something unintelligible under his breath before he left the booth, but Jordan didn't need to hear the words to know

that he thought she was crazy. It didn't matter. The scans and tests the doctors would perform probably wouldn't matter either, but at least it would give Ellie a fighting chance.

It was in that moment that Jordan knew she couldn't stay. Even if it wasn't for her father, Cold Creek had more than its fair share of tragedy and its inhabitants were vulnerable to charlatans like her. Darren had been right about that from the very beginning, even though she hadn't been able to see it then. Settling down in one place and being open about her gifts would only give people false hope. Sure, she could heal a few of them, just as she had healed a select few of the congregants chosen by her father, but in the end it was all just a matter of biding time. Miracles gave people hope in a loving God and hope for the future, but they were nothing more than the flicker of warmth that drew a moth to its death.

# TWENTY-TWO

THE REST of the festival was mercifully uneventful as Jordan worked her way through a smattering of forced readings. Whatever small measure of enthusiasm she had possessed before vanished with the knowledge that she had upturned the world of three unassuming teenagers. By a quarter 'till nine, traffic to the fortune booth had died down enough that Jordan felt it was safe to start closing up the booth. All she had to do was drop off the cash box at the admin trailer and she was free to leave Cold Creek behind.

While most of her night had been spent dreading another encounter with Darren, she found herself irrationally disappointed that he hadn't come. And why would he after what she had said in his apartment? Surely her words had served their purpose of earning his hatred, if not his apathy.

"Got time for one more?" The familiar voice was a welcome distraction from the one railing in her head. Jordan looked up to see Max standing in front of her booth. He looked like he'd just been working on one of his cars since his tank top was stained with grease and there was a dirty rag sticking out of his jeans pocket. His dark hair, which was usually slicked back so much that it looked black, was newly shaved on the sides of his head and the coif left on top fell over his eyes in a charmingly rakish look.

"You don't really believe in this stuff," said Jordan, motioning to the chair.

Max sat down, leaning over the back of the chair. "Maybe not," he conceded, slipping a bill into the cash box. "But you're not an easy woman to find these days and I was hoping you'd be here."

Jordan sighed. "If Darren sent you--"

"He didn't, but I'm sick of listening to him bitch like a girl who got stood up at prom," Max snorted. "You really did a number on him. The impenetrable wall of ego is an act, y'know. He does have feelings."

"I'm sorry," Jordan said, and she meant it. "I never meant to hurt him."

"As my uncle puts it, 'Never be sorry for something you can fix yourself,'" Max said, mimicking the mayor's gravelly voice.

"I can't fix this," Jordan said ruefully. "Trust me on that."

"Whatever he said can't be that bad, can it?"

"He didn't do or say anything. That's not why we broke up."

"Darren's always been a little rough around the edges," Max pressed. "I've known him my whole life and I've never seen him the way he is with you. He loves you, Jordan, and if you give him the chance, I know he'll prove it."

Jordan looked down at the cards she had been shuffling to channel her nervous energy. "If your aunt catches us talking, I'll get in trouble. Do you want me to read your cards or your palm?"

"Palm," Max said, placing his grease stained hand face-up on the card table. "Sorry about the grime. The soap only does so much."

"Working on one of your race cars?" Jordan asked, lighting a fresh candle.

"My bike. Steering's been acting up ever since I got it."

"Why don't you just replace it?" Jordan asked. If there was one thing the Danbridges weren't pressed for, it was money.

"I like fixing broken things," said Max, holding her gaze pointedly. The flickering glow of the candle brought out the gold in his eyes more than usual.

Jordan bit back the retort forming in her throat--or at least, she tried. "Is that why you stayed and fixed things with Lauren?"

Max's eyes narrowed sharply and his nostrils flared wide. The words that came out of his mouth were surprisingly measured, considering his obvious irritation. "There are reasons I had to break things off with Lauren. Reasons even Darren doesn't know about."

"And there are reasons I had to end things with him," Jordan said firmly. "I'm not good for Darren, you'll just have to trust me on that."

"Can't do that."

"Why not?" Jordan asked tersely. It had been a long day and getting interrogated by Darren's guard dog wasn't how she had hoped to end it.

"Because he deserves better than that," said Max. "He's been through enough. First his parents die, then his high school sweetheart bails on him. The poor guy's life is a country album. This is the first time I've seen him actually happy since we were kids, and it's obvious that he makes you happy, too."

"He does," Jordan admitted. More than she'd ever imagined was possible.

"Then why does the look in your eyes say you're about to fuck it all up?" he challenged. "Take it from someone who's done the fucking up enough times to know."

Jordan bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. "Let's just do your reading," she said, reaching for Max's hand. As soon as her fingertips brushed over Max's rough palm, it was like what had happened with Ellie Jacobs all over again. A vision flashed, but this time it wasn't a sobering picture of someone else's hospital room.

A creature unlike anything Jordan had ever seen with body of a monstrous wolf was leveling destruction on a burning city. A human arm hung from one of its jaws and fresh blood dripped from its gnashing teeth. Each set of the beast's eyes were aflame with red light and its bear-like paws made the earth quake with every step it took.

Jordan struggled to pull away, but her hand was stuck to Max's like she was being electrocuted. The beast's head swung around to look at her and she fell back onto the grass. She covered her eyes and turned away from the stench of death on the monster's breath as it hovered over her and prayed that the next bite would be clean.

"Jordan!" The sound of Max's voice snapped her out of the vision. Max was holding her on the ground and Jordan's chair was overturned. She must have fallen in reality as well as in her vision. Max shook her gently. "Hey, wake up. You started screaming and you blacked out."

"I had a vision," Jordan said shakily, struggling to sit up on her own. Max righted her chair and helped her into it.

"A vision?" he asked doubtfully. "Like a psychic vision? You really have those?"

"Not usually when I'm awake," Jordan said, trying to swallow. Her throat was dry. "It's been a weird day."

"It is the full moon," Max mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. What did you see?"

Jordan stared at Max. She was expecting him to react the way Darren would have, incredulously and afraid for her sanity. Instead, he seemed like he was questioning someone who'd just witnessed a crime. "A monster," she said carefully, afraid to divulge more than that.

"A monster, huh?" Max's tone grew stiff. "What did it look like?"

"Awful," Jordan said in a trembling voice. "It was the most awful thing I've ever seen."

Max's jaw tightened and he looked away. "Yeah, well, my aunt's been working you to the bone, so of course you're seeing shit," he mumbled guiltily.

"Yeah," Jordan murmured.

"I'll drive you home."

"No," Jordan said quickly. "I'm alright. I'd like to finish out the night and I still have to take the cash to your aunt."

"Okay," Max said, watching her in deep concern. He hesitated and reached for the pen she'd used to keep track of the customers. Before she could ask what he was doing, he took her hand and started writing on it. "Here's my number. I know this sounds weird, especially with everything that's going on between you and Darren, but I want you to call me if you need anything, okay? I mean it."

Jordan stared at him, then at the number he'd scrawled on her palm, not quite sure what to make of it. At first, she was tempted to tell him off for hitting on his best friend's recent ex, but she got the feeling that Max didn't have the reputation he did for nothing. If he was hitting on her, he'd probably be a hell of a lot more forward than that, but that just made it all the more puzzling. "Yeah… sure."

"Good," said Max, glancing at the table. "See you later and thanks for the uh, weird hand thing."

Jordan laughed tiredly, rubbing her throbbing temple. "Don't mention it. Sorry it wasn't enlightening, but I warned your aunt I was bad at this kind of thing."

"Nah. We'll try again sometime. See you," Max said gruffly, waving to her before he disappeared in the crowd.

Once he was gone, Jordan went behind the booth's curtain to change into her regular clothes. She grabbed the cash box and made the trek across the festival grounds to deposit it in Cindy's trailer before any last-minute

customers could show up. She didn’t think she could handle getting any more visions that night, whether they were the apocalyptic kind or simply depressing. It had been years since she’d experienced anything like that, and while her father’s guidance had been exploitative, it was even more bewildering alone.

So much for thinking she could run away. Then again, maybe Cold Creek just had a way of dredging up things people would rather forget.

When she made it to the trailer, only Cindy's assistant was there. It was at once a relief and a disappointment. Jordan felt guilty for skipping town without saying goodbye to the woman who had been a better friend than she deserved during her brief sojourn in the sleepy little town, but at least she had been able to do something to show her gratitude.

Besides, the longer she stuck around the more time she would have to disappoint Cindy and everyone else. It was much better to leave on a high note. *Especially* before her father could show up and ruin everything.

The full moon hanging over the festival looked so heavy that Jordan thought it just might come falling down. Her car was packed with everything she would need for the next few days and a moving truck would be out by the time the sun rose to remove the last physical traces of her stay in Cold Creek. As for the other traces, she had a feeling those would disappear easily enough on their own. Darren would find someone else. Someone who didn’t come with a truckload of baggage.

Most of the other vendors were starting to pack up by the time Jordan made it to the dark parking lot, shadowed by a few of Cold Creek's famous willow trees. Earlier in the day the shade had been welcome, but it made it difficult to see as she fumbled for her keys in the dark. If she left now, she could be in Pennsylvania by the time anyone realized she was gone.

Jordan finally succeeded at unlocking the car and tossed her bag in the passenger's seat, pausing to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She tentatively opened her phone to check and see if she had missed a call or even a text message from Darren. It was strange how a person could hope for and against the very same thing.

At first, Jordan thought the loud click she heard was coming from her phone, but when she felt cold steel pressed against her temple, she knew better. In the rearview mirror, barely visible in the shadows of the back seat, was Hank Thomas.

# TWENTY-THREE

"YOU'RE gonna want to give me that phone, girlie," Hank said, holding out the hand that wasn't pressing a gun into Jordan's temple.

Jordan's hand trembled as she placed the cellphone in his palm. The gun didn't waver. "I already turned the cash box in."

"I don't want your con money," he snapped, cocking the gun. "You know what I want."

Her heart sank. "Your wife."

"Stu Herbert couldn't sign his name on a check before you came here and now he's strutting around town like a twenty-year-old," he said sharply. "I saw what happened with those teenagers, so don't bullshit me. You might have Darren fooled, but I know what you really are."

Jordan swallowed hard. "You were watching me all night?"

"A good cop always does his research," he said simply. "I've been keeping an eye on you for a long time, and I've learned a lot of real interesting things. I know your real name ain't Jordan and I know about those devil worship books you keep beneath the floorboards of your apartment."

"How did you --?"

He nudged the gun into her head. "Less talking, more driving."

Jordan's hands were shaking so badly it took her a few tries to fit the key into the tumbler. When the engine finally roared to life, she reached for her seat belt only to feel another shove.

"Nu-uh. If you try to crash this car, you're goin' through the windshield right along with me. Pull out of the lot, onto the trail and take your first left. We're going to the hospital."

"Oh, God," she breathed, pulling out of the parking lot.

"After seeing some of the sick stuff on your bookshelf, I don't think you wanna be calling on him," Hank said coldly.

Jordan gripped the wheel to control her tremors and focused on keeping the car on the road. She hoped desperately that some passing driver would notice something amiss, but no assistance came. She followed Hank's instructions to the letter and grew more anxious with each mile that passed. Somehow, she had to keep him away from the hospital and all the vulnerable people inside of it.

"Make another left up there," he said as the bright white sign in front of the hospital came into view. "Drive past the main parking lot and go around that bend."

She followed his instructions until they came upon a quieter building that was obviously a recent add-on to the hospital itself. As they drew closer, she saw the modest sign for the hospice wing.

Maybe he really was just trying to save his wife. If that was true and he wasn’t a risk to anyone else, Jordan hoped she could reason with him. At least long enough to think of another solution.

"Park back there," he said, pointing to a desolate spot in the back of the lot. Once the car was off, Jordan's breathing was the only sound that punctuated the silence. "When you get out, you just remember that I could shoot a tin can off your balcony from the creek in the woods if I wanted to."

She shuddered and carefully opened the door, trying to remain calm as she stepped out of the car. He obviously mistook her rage for fear, which was just as well. He’d be less likely to see it coming when she had her chance to get the upper hand. Hank was behind her in an instant with a leather jacket draped over his forearm to hide the gun pressing into her back.

"I'm the only guard on this watch for the entire hospital, so just remember that if you scream, the only one who's gonna answer is me," he warned as he pushed her toward the entrance. Jordan noticed that the front desk was empty and so was the lobby, save for one man who had long since fallen asleep with his jacket over his shoulders. From the looks of him, he wasn't waking up for a long time.

"Keep moving," Hank muttered, urging her down a hallway to the right. The harsh fluorescent lights would have given the wing a surreal, nightmarish feel even under the best of circumstances. Even if she hadn't

already feared hospitals, Jordan knew she would have developed a phobia then. Every turn and flickering light looked sinister.

They came to a room near the end of the hall and Hank paused. He seemed about to say something, but instead he swiped a card in front of the door and a green light flashed above the handle, signaling that it was unlocked.

The room was small and clean with a single bed and a cot off to one side that Hank had doubtlessly occupied on many occasions. There were fresh flowers on the nightstand by the bed where a gaunt looking woman was sleeping. Her hair was cropped into a short industrial cut and her light-blue printed gown made her skin look yellow in the lighting, but she was still beautiful.

The room and the sleeping patient who occupied it weren't what Jordan noticed first, though. Darren sat in a chair on the far side of the room, his arms and legs bound to the frame with thick rope. His bloodied mouth was covered in tape, but his muffled screams were still audible. His desperate, bruised eyes met Jordan's, full of horror. She could only assume his injuries were the result of his struggle with Hank.

"Darren!" she cried, forgetting about the gun pressed against her back as she ran toward him. Hank jerked her back so hard that he nearly dislocated the same shoulder twice.

"That's enough," he growled, shoving her over to the other side of the hospital room. He walked over to Darren and leaned down. "I'm real sorry to do this to you, doc. You're a good man, but you have no idea what you're getting yourself into. Now's probably as good a time as any for you to know your girlfriend was planning to leave tonight. Packed up her car and everything."

The rage left Darren's eyes for a moment as they settled on Jordan again, questioning.

She looked away, too ashamed to admit it out loud. She knew her silence was enough confirmation. Besides, they both had bigger problems now.

Hank looked between them and smirked. "Looks like you two lovers have a lot left unsaid. I'd hate to deny a man his answers before he dies, so I'll do you both a favor and let you have a little chat. Darren, just remember that if you so much as scream, I'll put a bullet in her head before a syllable

can make its way out of your mouth. Same goes for you, little lady. Understand?"

Darren was seething, but he nodded. So did Jordan. Hank ripped the tape off all at once and Jordan could see the pain on Darren's face, but he didn't make a sound. He worked his jaw for a moment before turning back to Jordan. "Why?" he asked, his voice hoarse from yelling.

At least now she knew why he hadn't shown up at the festival. Jordan swallowed the knot in her throat, or tried. "I was trying to protect you," she said shakily. "All of you."

"From what?" he demanded.

Jordan looked away, more afraid of Byron Hurlow from a distance than she was of the man who had a gun pointed at her head in the same room.

"I'll answer that for you since the witch isn't feeling chatty," Hank said in a mocking tone. "She's scared of her daddy."

Jordan's shoulders stiffened. She could feel Darren reading her every move. "Is that true? Is that why you ended it?" he demanded of her. "Did he threaten you again?"

"Oh, looks like I've stumbled upon a lover's quarrel," Hank quipped.

"Just let him go," Jordan pleaded. "You want me, not him."

"Happily," said Hank. "Once you heal Susan, I'll be glad to rot away in a cell for the next ten to twenty years and you and your boyfriend can spend your days running from your Bible thumpin' father all you like."

"You've lost your fucking mind," Darren muttered. "You and all the other gossips in town. Jordan is just a normal woman. She can't heal your wife any more than you can bend a spoon with your mind."

"I'd watch your mouth if I were you," Hank said, aiming the gun at Darren's forehead. "You don't know what you're talking about. The innocent little schoolgirl routine is an act, but her fortunetelling sure ain't. She doesn't just heal people, she sees things. This girl's a freak, but she's a freak with powers like you wouldn't believe."

Darren shook his head in a mixture of pity and disgust. "Just let her go, Hank, before you do something you'll regret. You haven't done anything that can't be undone, not yet."

Hank brought the side of the pistol down hard on Darren's head. Jordan gave a startled cry but Hank shoved her back when she tried to reach for Darren.

"Why don't you undo that, you sanctimonious prick?” Hank sneered, turning back to Jordan. He kept the gun on Darren. "Next time it'll be a bullet in his head. Get to work.” He nodded toward a box on the floor beside the bed.

Jordan's stomach twisted into a knot as she realized the box was filled with items from her apartment, including some hacked-off branches of her beloved plants and a spellbook she hadn't so much as opened in years. He really had ransacked her place.

"You don't understand," she began shakily. "It's not a matter of not wanting to do this. *I can't.* I'm not powerful enough.”

Darren groaned, a trail of blood seeping from the cut on his forehead. "Jordan, don't encourage him. He's delusional."

"I said shut up!" Hank roared before turning back to her. "As for you, you better hope you're wrong. If you can't heal her, your boy here's as good as dead. Or maybe he'll get lucky and the bullet'll just leave him in a coma for the next ten years like my Susan.”

Jordan cringed. She knew she couldn't do what Hank wanted, but maybe going through the motions would at least buy them some time. She swallowed hard and began to remove the items from the box. "I need a space to work," she said quietly.

Darren opened his mouth to argue again, but Jordan gave him a pleading look to stay his protest. Hank wheeled over a tray table from the corner of the room and she began to collect the items in the page he had marked in her book. It was the same spell she had used to heal Hermes. Hank had dutifully gathered everything the healing spell required. What he couldn't possibly know was that the ingredient it all hinged on was something Jordan simply didn't possess in the quantities it would take to heal a human who was already so far gone and had been for a long time.

"Don't try anything funny," Hank warned, on edge as he watched her prepare.

"What's she going to do," Darren muttered, "click her heels together three times and send you back to Oz?"

Hank ignored him, to Jordan's relief. She stayed focused on placing each item on her makeshift altar, taking her time.

"Hurry it up," Hank ordered.

Jordan frowned at him. "You're already asking me to do the impossible, now you want me to rush the job?"

His silence told her she had succeeded in buying a few more minutes but she knew she couldn't put it off for long. Hank would have his spell, one way or another, and she still had no idea what to do when it failed. And it would fail. Bringing back someone who was only breathing because of life support was practically necromancy. If Susan’s soul was still clinging to her body, there was no telling how to reach her.

"The book said there was another ingredient," Hank said, leaning in to look over her shoulder at the setup. He took the book from her hands and tapped the page. "Vitae. What's that?"

She sighed. "It means blood."

"Jordan!" Darren growled.

"It's fine," she said, giving him a reassuring nod as she removed a short silver blade from the box. "It doesn't take much. It's just a symbol."

"This is insane," said Darren. When she dragged the blade across the lifeline on her left palm and held it over a shallow bowl of water, he cringed and looked away.

"I need quiet," she said, looking at them both. Hank nodded, but Darren wouldn't meet her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Jordan picked up the bowl filled with her diluted blood and carried it over to the edge of the bed. Holding her hand over the water, she began to chant the softly spoken incantation in the book.

The whispered chant built in intensity until Jordan had repeated it seven times. At first nothing happened, which was exactly what she expected. When the water began to ripple in the bowl, a flicker of hope rose inside of her. She continued to chant, renewed in her intention. Even as the lights flickered overhead, she kept her focus on the bowl, not on Hank's anxious shifting or Darren's muttered curses of disbelief.

"Shh," Hank hissed, taking renewed interest in the spell. "I think it's working."

Once Jordan was sure that something really was happening, she took the bowl in both hands and raised it to Susan's lips.

"Wait," said Hank, grabbing her arm.

Jordan frowned as some of the water sloshed out of the bowl. "She has to drink it. How do you think Stu Herbert was healed?"

He hesitated a moment before stepping back. "If this does anything to her --"

"I would never do that," she snapped. It wasn't Susan's fault that denial had turned her husband into a monster.

"Jordan," Darren pleaded, "it's not too late to stop this. It's not too late to get help, for both of you." The pity in his voice stung more than his disgust. "She can't even swallow on her own, she's been in a coma for over a decade."

"What did I tell you about opening your mouth?" Hank snarled, landing a punch square on Darren's jaw. At the moment of impact, one of the fluorescent light panels overhead shorted out.

"Please," Jordan cried. "I'm almost done."

Hank looked up at the ceiling, then back at Jordan. Darren's head hung down in disorientation from the recent blow. "Hurry," snapped Hank.

Jordan turned back to Susan and dipped the bowl to allow a small amount of liquid to pass over the sleeping woman's lips. She held her hand over the woman's throat and murmured another incantation to help her swallow.

Susan gulped the liquid down and the silence that fell over the room was punctuated only by Darren's gasp of disbelief.

"She's awake," Hank said, his voice softened with hope.

"Not yet," Jordan warned. "It's just a simple spell to stimulate the reflexes." She tilted the bowl and made Susan swallow a more generous mouthful of the arcane concoction. Soon, the contents of the entire bowl were gone. Jordan set it aside and placed her hand on the woman's forehead. She thought Susan's cheeks looked a bit less sallow, but she couldn't be sure if it was just a trick of the light or not.

She started chanting with greater certainty. The lights began to flicker again and, to Jordan's amazement as well as her audience's, the heart monitor's laconic rhythm began to pick up.

"My God, it's working," Hank whispered in awe.

Jordan felt the connection form, energy passing from her body down her arm and through Susan's skin. It took more concentration than ever to maintain the nascent bond, nurturing it from an ember to a small flame. The discarded bowl began to tremble on the nightstand and the edges of the clean white blanket covering Susan's body began to lift as if someone was peeling them back.

"Holy shit," Darren breathed.

Hank laughed in a mixture of joy and disbelief.

As the connection intensified, Jordan felt the power she had once had to force out being siphoned through her fingertips like a whirlpool and picking up speed. A red droplet of blood fell onto the pristine blanket, but it wasn't until Darren called it to her attention that she realized it was coming from her nose.

“Whatever she’s doing, it’s too much,” Darren growled. “You have to let her stop.”

"It's working," Hank replied. "She'll be fine."

Darren was silent but Jordan could feel his watchful eyes on her. Before long, the blood wasn't just coming from her nose. She felt a thick tear leak out of one eye, then the other. What had begun as a dull ache in her temples had turned into sharp throbbing behind her eyes. With every beat of her heart, a complex network of blood vessels overlaid her vision.

"Stop!" Darren cried, thrashing so hard against his restraints that the legs of his chair scraped the floor. "It's killing her, can't you see that?"

Jordan let out a desperate gasp but kept her hand firmly pressed against Susan's forehead, in part because the energy transfer had created a seal she knew she had no hope of breaking.

"You think I give a fuck?" challenged Hank. "You have no idea who this bitch really is or what she's done."

"Whatever she's done, she doesn't deserve to lose her life because you can't accept the fact that your wife is dead!"

Hank was silent for a long moment and Jordan was filled with terror that a gunshot was going to be the next sound she heard. Instead, she heard the rustling of paper. She couldn't turn away from Susan, but Hank had obviously given Darren something to read.

“In 2003, a tent service held by the Rockport Tabernacle of God burned to the ground with four hundred and four people trapped inside, including Marla and Ezekiel Hurlow," Hank said, taking on the calm, authoritative tone that had probably been his default before he had become the very thing he once hunted. "The sole survivors? Reverend Byron Hurlow and his thirteen-year-old daughter, Alyssa. Ten years later, little Alyssa wins a generous settlement against dear old daddy and the Southwestern Tabernacle Association based on allegations of religious abuse, kidnapping and child endangerment."

Darren was silent for a long moment before he said, "She told me about the fire. She was a victim. Are you that sick, Hank? Is your mind really so

twisted you can't recognize that?"

"The funny thing about that case," Hank continued, "is that the fire marshal was damn near clueless about what started the fire. Not a faulty wire in the place. It all happened so fast that no one was able to escape, except for your girlfriend and the good minister. Now, the newspapers say Byron Hurlow held his own daughter hostage in an attic for ten years, but I'm more inclined to believe he was protecting the world from the thing that killed his wife and boy."

Jordan let out a choked sob as tears mingled with the blood leaking from her eyes. Her knees gave way but her hand remained stuck to Susan's forehead like it was magnetized.

"Please, Hank," Darren begged through gritted teeth. "I don't know how any of this is possible, but I don’t care. Please let her stop. She doesn't have it in her."

"Oh, she does," he said coldly. "It might kill her, but if it brings Susan back and gives those people that bitch burnt to a crisp their justice, so be it."

"You're a monster," Darren snarled.

"Oh, I know." Jordan didn't need to see Hank to hear the smirk in his tone. "But so is she."

Jordan collapsed as her focus failed her. The lights stopped flickering and she was only vaguely aware of her name being called in the distance as she collapsed on the floor. She stared up at the ceiling, her vision tunneled but clearer than it had been a moment ago. A moth was caught behind the screen of the fluorescent light hanging above and the way it twitched as it was slowly cooked in the heat was a strangely familiar sight.

She had seen something similar before, somewhere far away. Maybe it was a dream or simply something she had tried to forget.

# TWENTY-FOUR

"ALYSSA," Byron said warily, placing a steadying hand on her shoulder. "You're hurting him now. It's time to stop."

"I can't, daddy," the small girl drawled. Sweat beaded on her forehead and leaked down the sweetheart neckline of her hand-sewn floral dress. "My hand is stuck."

The dentist who was kneeling on the altar in front of her began to convulse. Those gathered in the crowded tent waiting for their turn were starting to grow agitated. Women who had been fanning themselves with programs from the service had started to murmur anxiously amongst themselves. Even Ezekiel was looking at Alyssa with concern from the side of the stage, his crisp gray suit jacket opened to provide some semblance of relief from the heat.

"Remember what daddy told you," her father said tensely. "The Lord can see your heart. If you're not focused on him, it won't work."

"But I am focused," she said, grimacing as she tried to pry her hand away. "He won't let go. I can see all his thoughts, it hurts."

Byron laughed nervously, wiping the sweat off the back of his neck with the crisp white monogramed cloth that was always tucked into his breast pocket when it wasn't in use. "That's just the devil's stronghold, sweetheart. Lawrence, she can't do it all. Whatever it is, you've gotta give it over to the good Lord now. He can deliver you, but you've got to reach out and take the lifesaver."

Lawrence gritted his jaw and let out a gasp of distress as a group of women with long hair and even longer skirts surrounded him, placing their hands on his back, head and shoulders. Their lips fluttered with whispered

prayers. Some were intelligible, but others were murmured in tongues that purportedly belonged to the angels.

That was one part of the services that Alyssa would never understand. The murmurs of the women certainly shared similarities in terms of cadence and syllabaries, but they didn't sound anything like the way angels talked. Certainly not the one watching her from the back of the room. His brilliant golden hair was pulled back at the base of his neck and his crisp black suit was conservative enough, but he still didn't fit in with his surroundings.

It was a good thing none of the others could see him, she thought. They wouldn't like the things the angel had to say at all. In fact, Alyssa doubted they would even believe he was an angel since he spoke in perfect English.

The angel gave her a slow nod for reasons she couldn't begin to fathom. A moment later, she crumpled to the ground and so did the dentist.

Ezekiel had already come up onto the stage and he caught her before their father could. Cool water sloshed against Alyssa's lips and the girl eagerly drank from the bottle he held to her mouth. When she opened her eyes, the angel had vanished as he liked to do. Safe in her brother's arms, Alyssa succumbed to the six hours she had spent under the glaring lights of the stage and slept for the first time in days.

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"Jordan?" Darren's voice broke through the memory as she was shaken back into the land of the living. When she opened her eyes, Darren was untied and leaning over her, his eyes full of relief as he said, "You're awake."

"Susan?" she asked hoarsely. The vacant look on his face was all the answer she needed. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I tried, but I'm not strong enough."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered.

Jordan couldn't see Hank and she didn't have the strength to lift her head to look for him. She smiled tiredly. "You didn't believe in my tinctures. Would you really have believed me about any of this?"

Darren hesitated. "Probably not," he admitted, looking up. The way his eyes widened in fear gave her only a moment's warning before a large hand grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. Soon, Hank had Jordan pinned to his chest with his gun pressed into her temple.

"What the hell did you do?" he snarled.

"I told you it wouldn't work," Jordan said hoarsely. Giving her energy to Susan had taken whatever fight was left in her. "I did everything I could."

"You're lying," he growled. "You're still alive, and you can try again."

"No," Darren snarled, taking a step forward.

"One more step and I'll shoot," Hank warned.

"Please," Jordan begged, “just let him go and I will. I'll try again and again until it brings her back or kills me, just let him go."

“No!” Darren bellowed. “This is over.”

"It's okay, Darren," she said tiredly. Just like that day under the tent and the bright lights, exhaustion and heat from an unknown source was weighing her down. She had been running, hiding for so long that death didn't hold the same dread it once had, especially if it meant dying in the place of the man she loved. "Hank is right about one thing. I did kill all those people and I deserve to die. It was foolish of me to think I could keep running forever."

"You were a child!" Darren snapped, his brows furrowing in that familiar indignant scowl she had come to love. "Even if you somehow started the fire, you weren't to blame and you sure as hell don't deserve to die!"

"He's right," Hank said in a dangerously calm tone. Jordan tensed as she felt the gun leave her head and aim at Darren. "Maybe I should let you live, at least long enough to know what it feels like to lose the one you love. Maybe then you'll understand."

"No!” she cried. Before the word had fully escaped her lips, the shot rang out and a red blotch appeared on Darren's coat, just over his heart. He looked down in disbelief, then back at Jordan for an instant before the light faded from his eyes completely and he crumpled to the floor.

Jordan stared in shock. She had prepared herself for death, but not for the sickle to swing in Darren's direction.

Hank's vice grip uncoiled from around her chest. He staggered back and from the look on his face, she could tell even he hadn't foreseen his own

actions, at least not fully. The look of shock lasted for only an instant, but it was enough.

Jordan rushed to Darren's side, struggling to pull his shoulders off the ground, but he was dead weight. The spot of blood had turned into a blackening sun on the crisp white backdrop of his coat. "No," she breathed, her hand trembling as it caressed his cheek. His skin was warm for now, but the life force within him was already gone. Its absence was glaring, leaving Jordan apathetic as to whether their captor turned the gun on her next or not. The longer she stared at Darren's lifeless face, the more her apathy turned to hope that he would.

The sound of sneakers on the linoleum floor dashed that hope, and when she finally managed to look away from Darren's body, Hank was gone.

Left alone with nothing but the sound of Susan's heart monitor to mark the passage of time, Jordan collapsed in sobs, clutching Darren to her chest.

"You just can't help anyone these days without it backfiring," said a familiar voice. Jordan turned sharply to see Hermes sitting in the chair Darren had recently occupied, one long leg draped casually over the other. "Throw a dog a bone and the next thing you know the whole pack wants a cut. In the old days, they'd burn you at the stake when you couldn't deliver. Now they shoot you. The lyrics change, but it’s the same old song.”

"You," she hissed. "You did this."

The demon laughed. “I’ll take credit for enclosing this area so no one would hear the commotion, but alas, you got yourself into this one, dollface. Granted, I provided the setting and pushed you towards the actors, but you played the role of the bleeding-heart witch just flawlessly on your own. Brava, darling. Your finest performance yet, I'd say."

"You're with him, aren't you?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"Your father or the angel who's got a hand up his ass?" Hermes asked. "Not that it matters. I'm an independent contractor. I work for myself and myself alone."

"What do you want with me?" she demanded.

"As I told you before, I want to help you," he said, standing. "Now that your needs are more immediate, maybe you'll be in the mood to make a deal."

"What are you talking about?"

He rolled his eyes. "Forgive me, but I can only go through this routine so many times before it gets old. Let's just cut to the chase, shall we?" He

reached into his jacket and pulled out a tablet similar to the one Darren used. "I'll bring back your lover, and in return, you'll be my bitch for all eternity. I'm feeling generous, so I'll even throw in your mother and brother for free. Call it the equinox special."

Jordan let Darren slip from her arms and stood to examine the device. It read like a standard legal contract as she scrolled down the screen and skimmed it. She looked back up at him in disbelief. "You want me to sign away my soul on a tablet?"

"You might have grown up under a rock, but that doesn't mean the rest of us haven't changed with the times," he said, offering her a stylus. "Rest assured, it's official and binding."

Jordan took the implement with great hesitation. "You'll really bring them back? All of them?"

"Just the three you love," he said curtly. "Sorry to be blunt, but the paperwork would be a nightmare if I brought back everyone you've killed. Your boy toy and fundie family will be enough of a project, but I can guarantee their resurrections. In fact, you'll be the one to do it."

"I don't understand."

He sighed. "You're a witch. We don't have a whole lot of time to work through all the emotional baggage keeping you from accepting that key fact since your boyfriend isn't getting any less dead, so just trust me, okay?"

“What are you going to do with my soul?” Jordan demanded. She didn’t particularly care on her own behalf. She’d always figured she was damned anyway, and there wasn’t much the demon could do to make things worse. It was the fear that he would use her power to hurt more people the way the angel had that gave her pause.

“That’s such a *long* way in the future,” he said dismissively. “Really no point in worrying about it. My immediate plans are far more interesting.”

“And those are?”

“When you were born, your father received a vision. He wasn’t the only one,” Hermes said, his eyes narrowing like a cat’s. “You’re not just any witch, my darling. You’re *the* witch, and whoever gets to your pretty little soul first controls the end game.”

“What are you talking about?” she demanded, struggling to keep her thoughts straight knowing that every moment that passed, Darren’s soul slipped further away.

“You’re the Whore of Babylon. Or, at least, you could be with the right training and a *serious* makeover,” he answered.

Jordan glared at him. “I’m glad you find this all so funny.”

“Oh, it’s a laugh! But I’m not joking,” he said flatly. “You *are* the Whore of Babylon, and under my tutelage, you’ll be worthy of the name. Right now, you’re nothing more than a second-rate witch who’s about five minutes away from adding another name to the body count courtesy of her own ineptitude.”

Jordan looked down at Darren’s pale face and swallowed hard. “If I do this… if everything you say is true, you’re going to use me to hurt people.”

“Actually my plans are far more interesting than chaos and destruction, but does it really matter?” he purred. “You’re going to say yes anyway.”

Jordan clenched her jaw. He was right. He was probably insane and if he wasn’t and she agreed to accept his help, she was even crazier, but he was right. Her decision was already made if there was so much as a chance at bringing Darren back and saving Ezekiel. Even if both of them would hate her for it.

"Good girl. Now, the thing about witches is that you're natural conduits for energy. My brethren and I have been barred from doing more than a few sleight of hand tricks in the physical realm, but the loophole is that we can work through witches as long as we get their permission," he explained. "Following me so far, Pollyanna?"

“Yes,” she gritted out.

"Guess the homeschooling wasn’t a total flop,” he mused. "Anyway, once you sign this contract, I'll become your familiar. That will allow me to take my human form whenever I like, and in return, I'll help you get all your witchy power-ups and unlock all those gifts your parents suppressed. Gifts that will help you achieve your full potential. You'll need them to raise your brother and mother."

"Why can't you just bring them back now?”

"Because there's no fun in that, first of all," he replied. "Second, unlike Darren, they've been rotting for over a decade. It'll take more time and a lot more juice than either of us have at the moment."

She hesitated. "Why would a demon agree to serve a human?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're missing the big picture here. Like I said, you’re not *just* a human. You’re a weapon and my golden ticket to…

everything. Being your familiar for the remainder of your mortal lifetime, which is just a drop in the bucket to me, is really a small sacrifice.”

“If I’m so fucking important, then why did you let all this happen?” she demanded. “Why show up now?”

“Questions, questions. I can answer them all or we can bring Darren back, but you’re going to have to pick one or the other.”

Jordan tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry. "You swear you'll bring them back?"

Hermes leaned in, pushing the screen towards her. "*We* will. Together,” he promised in a gentler tone. "I might be a demon and I can't promise that your afterlife will be a day at the spa, but I meant what I said before. I'll never lie to you, Jordan. Never.”

She hesitated only a moment before taking the tablet and signing on the line at the bottom. The stylus disappeared from her hand and an instant later, so did the tablet. When she looked up, the demon was twirling the stylus between his fingers before he tucked it away in his pocket. "Told you I was good at sleight of hand."

"That's it?" she asked warily, instinctively pressing her hand to her chest. "I don't feel any different."

"You were expecting smoke and maniacal cackling, maybe?" He shrugged. "I could do that if it'll make you feel better."

"No thanks."

"There is just one more thing it takes to make our partnership official."

"What's that?"

The demon slipped a slender finger under her chin and tilted her head up. Rather than answer, he pressed his lips against hers. They were cool and silken to the touch, just like the rest of him. Jordan gave a muffled cry of surprise as Hermes crushed her against his chest and deepened the kiss. At first, she tried to push him away, but a strange feeling of familiarity washed over her and a surge of energy passed through his touch.

It was only when she went limp in his arms that she realized he was siphoning energy from her. She felt faint, but strangely not drained like she had when funneling her own life force into Susan. The demon supported her as he broke off the dizzying kiss and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Mhm," he purred, licking his lips. “Virgin is my favorite flavor of witch."

Jordan's face flamed as she stumbled away from him. "Was that really necessary?" she demanded, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“Necessary,” he scoffed. “In a way. Gives the whole deal a personal feel."

"Just bring him back," Jordan said, pointing to Darren's lifeless body.

"Pushy," he muttered, rubbing his hands together as he knelt beside the corpse. "Alright, now for the really fun part. First things first, exactly how much did he know about you before he died?"

"Too much," Jordan murmured. "I made the mistake of telling him about my past and he saw the spell beginning to work on Susan.”

"That's what I was afraid of," Hermes said thoughtfully, biting his thumb. "Looks like a full mental scrub is in order."

"What?" she asked, panicked. "You can't erase everything!”

"I'm not going to, you are," he said. "Consider this your first bike ride with training wheels on. You can leave Darren’s memories of your relationship if you *want*, but it's not advisable."

"Why not?"

"We've got a lot of ground to cover and you're going to be knee-deep in magic by the time the next full moon rolls around. You were drawn to Cold Creek for a reason. It’s the only place that’s truly safe from your father, and everyone else who’s going to come after you now that you’re on the radar.”

“On the radar?” She frowned. “What did you do?”

“I claimed you. It’s like a stock going public, there’s no way to hide it. Before you give me that look, let me remind you that if *I* hadn’t found you first and brought you here, it was only a matter of time someone worse did.”

Jordan doubted that, but there wasn’t much time to challenge him. She looked down at Darren, her heart breaking at the thought of him not remembering her. “Is this really the only way?”

“No, but it’s the easiest way you can keep him at a distance without having to leave town. Assuming you care about him as much as you say.”

"Will he remember me at all?"

"It's a small town, it would be inconvenient for him to forget everything," said Hermes. "We'll just tweak his memory a little. He'll forget all about this clusterfuck, especially the magical bits. He can go back to being a cranky atheist who had an ill-advised and short-lived fling with the local new-ager."

Jordan wanted to argue, but Darren's lips were turning blue and she knew Hermes was right. It was the best way to keep Darren out of her life without raising suspicion. "How do we do this?"

"I don't do Latin and robes," he said with a distasteful sneer. "I like to stick to the basics. In this case, that means equivalent exchange."

Jordan looked up sharply. "You mean a life for a life?"

"Bingo."

"I can't do that," she said quickly. "Selling my soul is one thing, but I can't take anyone else's life. Not intentionally."

"Well, aren't you just darling," he said dryly. "Fortunately for you, the perfect candidate for sacrifice is at a bar on the outskirts of town waiting for the fuzz to catch up with him."

The temptation to extinguish her grief and rage with Hank Thomas' blood was strong, but Jordan shook her head. "No. It's wrong and I won't do it."

He sighed. "Well, don't say I didn't try. Your soul is still mine, even if you refuse to accept the consolation prize."

Jordan glanced around the room, her gaze falling on the sleeping woman in the hospital bed. Her eyes widened slightly in realization. "There's someone else."

"Who, sleeping beauty?" he asked doubtfully. "How is that better than trading a murderer's life for his victim's?"

"Susan never wanted this," said Jordan. "I could feel it when I was healing her. The spell failed, not just because I didn't have the power but because she didn't want to come back. Darren said Hank fought with the doctors and kept her alive because he couldn't let go. If I can reach her somehow, maybe I could help her move on."

"It's always going to be the hard, boring way with you, isn't it?" Hermes grumbled, folding his arms. "Fine. Give it a shot."

Jordan wasted no time walking over to the bed. She closed her eyes and pressed her hand against Susan's forehead, but she felt nothing. "It's been so long since I could see someone's thoughts on command," she said, looking back at the demon. "How do I do it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, my other witches knew all their reading, writing and arithmetic by the time they came to me. How did it feel when you were younger?"

She paused. "It always happened when I was healing. I'd put energy into them and they'd project things back to me. I don't think it was conscious."

"Then try that," he suggested.

"But I've already lost a lot of energy," said Jordan, already feeling on the verge of collapse. "I won't have anything left to bring Darren back."

Hermes came to stand behind her and placed his hand on top of hers. "That's where having a familiar comes in handy."

Energy surged through Jordan in far greater quantities than what Hermes had taken as he put his hand over hers. Jordan gasped as something both warm and cool spread through her veins and passed through her breath, as if filling her every pore. Susan's eyes fluttered and Jordan's own vision flashed.

When her vision returned to normal, she was no longer standing in the hospital room. Instead, she was on the porch of a little home she thought she vaguely recognized from Cold Creek's Main Street. Susan was sitting on a porch swing, holding a book in her hands as her legs lazily pumped the swing back and forth. Her cheeks were full and warm and her hair gleamed, held back by a barrette covered in rhinestones.

"Hello, Jordan," she said with a knowing smile that made the witch jolt. "I was hoping you'd come."

Jordan stared at her in wonder. "Susan, you're alive."

Susan gave a musical laugh that solved the mystery of Hank's devotion. "I wouldn't say that," she said, looking down either side of the uncharacteristically quiet street. "This place is more of a train station. It's a layover for my real destination, and I'm getting a little tired of waiting for the final boarding call, if you know what I mean."

"You know why I'm here," Jordan said guiltily.

"Of course. I welcome it," said Susan, closing her book as she stood. "My Hank was good and kind once, but unresolved grief is kind of like a shadow. It distorts things, making wolves out of puppy dogs and monsters out of good men. He doesn't know how to let go and I can't keep waiting for him to. He needs help, and so do I."

"You want me to kill you?"

Susan laughed again, but this time the song was laced with sadness. "Oh, honey, I died a long time ago. I just want to be put to rest, that's all. If it brings Darren back, all the better, but I'd ask you to do the same even if he wasn't involved. You make sure he knows that."

Jordan took a deep breath. "I don't know what will happen once you're gone."

Susan smiled widely. "Does anyone? I think that's part of the fun, don't you?"

"I guess I'll find out one day."

Susan's smile faded.

"What is it?" Jordan asked warily.

"You made a deal with a demon, Jordan," she said carefully. "Now, I don't know what's all the way behind the veil, but I hear whispers here and there. Enough to know they don't take kindly to that… Upstairs."

Jordan swallowed hard. "No, I guess not."

"Well," Susan sighed, nodding into the distance as the sound of a train whistle approached. "I'm ready if you are. Looks like that's my train."

Jordan spun around in confusion only to realize they were no longer on the porch but on the platform of a train station with a steam locomotive barreling down the tracks. "I didn't think Cold Creek had a train station."

"It used to," Susan said, bending to pick up a bag by her feet. When Jordan turned around, Susan was wearing a beautiful blue-and-white scarf that brought out the color of her eyes.

"How do I do it?" Jordan asked nervously.

"I haven't taken a breath on my own in years," said Susan. Her eyes fluttered shut as her chest expanded with air. "Hank always thought I was crazy for liking the way the steam engine smelled. To me, it's always smelled like adventure."

The train pulled up and a stout man in a conductor's hat leaned out of the open door as it rolled to a stop. "All aboard for Grand Central."

"Wait," Jordan called as Susan walked toward the tracks. The woman stopped, handing her bag over to the train conductor. Jordan continued, "How do I know this is really what you want? That this isn't just my head coming up with a fantasy to ease my conscience?"

"You don't," said Susan. "You just have to trust your gut, do what you think is right, and be willing to live with the consequences either way."

Susan turned and took the conductor's hand as he helped her onto the train. She looked back at Jordan one last time and raised her hand with a small smile. "Thank you," she mouthed, lifting the hem of her skirt as she climbed the last step.

Jordan gave a feeble wave, watching as the smoke stack billowed angrily. A moment later, the train was in motion again. She watched until it disappeared into the distance and felt the ground trembling beneath her. A crack between her feet turned into a chasm before she had the chance to step away and when she fell, she fell into a pair of strong arms.

"Easy," said Hermes, holding her up. "I take it you got what you were looking for?"

"I think so," Jordan said, disoriented. She managed to stand on her own, still empowered by the demon's energy. She stared at Susan and then at the steadily gasping ventilator, recalling the woman's cryptic words. "I know what I need to do."

The demon stepped back and watched her. Jordan took a deep breath instinctively and hesitated only a moment before pulling the plug. "Goodbye, Susan," she whispered. "Have a nice trip."

The ventilator breathed one final gasp and the heart rate monitor began to fall. It all happened faster than Jordan would have imagined, barely giving her time to think it through. Not that there was any undoing some things once they were done.

When the monitor screamed and the line went flat, Jordan looked to Susan's face, hoping for a hint of a smile or any confirmation that she had made the right decision. There was none to be found. Susan didn't look peaceful, but she didn't look distressed, either. Mostly, she just looked the same as she probably had for ten years.

Jordan decided that was all the confirmation she was going to get.

When Hermes' hand settled on her shoulder, Jordan jolted. "The first time is always the hardest," he said, his tone surprisingly gentle. "It'll get easier from here."

"You say that like killing people is going to become a regular occurrence."

"This time you got lucky," he replied. "There won't always be a sacrificial lamb tied to the altar to keep you from making the tough decisions. As for today, just be grateful."

She turned toward Darren's body and found it a little easier to live with the guilt when she reminded herself of what it was all for. "What do I have to do now?"

"Nothing," the demon replied, glancing at his watch. "In fact, he should be coming around any --"

Darren's body convulsed and he let out a ragged gasp as air entered his lungs for the first time in the better part of an hour. Jordan ran to him as he choked and sputtered.

"Oh, about any time now I'd say," Hermes mused.

"Is he alright?" Jordan asked in a panic.

"He will be, give him time," said Hermes. "I should get him out of here, though. Hank made sure this place was isolated for what he had planned, but it won't be long before the next security guard shows up for his shift."

"What are we going to tell the police?"

"Let me take care of that. By morning, everyone will think Hank Thomas finally had enough and pulled the plug on his wife before skipping town. The only trace of Darren's day trip to the afterlife will be a nasty hangover and you won't have been seen since you went home early from the festival."

Jordan frowned. "All wrapped up nice and tidy with a bow, huh?"

"Don't sulk. You're getting everything you wanted," Hermes scolded, draping Darren's arm around his shoulder as he lifted the partially conscious man to his feet. "It could be a lot worse."

"I guess so," she said, looking at Darren one last time. It didn't really matter what she wanted, she reminded herself. As long as he was going to be okay, it was a fair deal in her book.

"Go on home, get some sleep," said Hermes. "You're going to need it."

Jordan gave him a confused look, but before she could ask what he meant, the two men vanished. Once again, there was no puff of smoke or flash of light. They were just gone.

Jordan cast a forlorn look at the bed. She walked over and covered Susan's face with the blanket. It was the least she could do.

"I'd ask who died, but I guess it's a bit too soon for that kind of humor."

Jordan spun around to face Susan. The woman looked every bit as solid as Jordan, and she was wearing the same outfit she had been wearing in the dream. "Susan! How? I just --"

Susan held her hands out with a shrug. "I couldn't reach out to Hank no matter how many times I tried, but you seem to be like an airport--international territory it's safe to visit without a passport as long as you don't step too far outside the building."

Jordan wasn't sure she liked the sound of that, but she had too many other questions to press the issue. "So you're okay? I did the right thing by

setting you free?”

Susan laughed. "I didn't come all the way back to talk about me. I came to warn you," she said, growing somber. "He'll come after you, you know."

"Hank?" Jordan asked worriedly.

Susan shook her head.

"Who, then?"

"I'm sorry, that's all I can say," she murmured. "That and I have a message for you."

"A message? From who?"

"He said not to tell you who it’s from, just that you should be careful. I might be the first spirit to visit you, but I won't be the last," Susan said, lowering her voice. "You're a medium now, Jordan. It's one of the gifts you locked away as a child. Killing me was a ritual, it opened a door. Some doors can't be closed once they're opened."

"A ritual?"

"The demon Hermes is well known on the other side and rumor has it he's planning something. I'm supposed to tell you that you made a horrible mistake, and even though it can't be undone, you still shouldn't trust Hermes. This is the first ritual of five that he'll ask you to perform in order to unlock the power it will take to fulfill your contract. I don't know what that means, but it doesn't sound good."

Jordan gulped, remembering Hermes’ words about her being the Whore of Babylon. No matter how much she wished that was just another slam, she got the feeling it was much more than that. "No, it doesn't. What am I supposed to do?"

"Play along, for now," said Susan, narrowing her eyes. "Just wait and when the time is right, you'll be contacted by another spirit who can give you further guidance."

"But I thought nothing could be done," she said, confused. "I already sold my soul."

Susan smiled. "All contracts have loopholes, Jordan. Remember that, too." She paused, glancing over her shoulder. "I've gotta run. My time's almost up, and so is yours. You don't want to be here when they find my body."

"Thank you, Susan. Wherever you end up, I hope it’s better than this."

Susan gave another musical laugh. "Oh, I'm sure it will be. The wonderful thing about the future is that no matter how shitty it turns out to

be, it's still better than staying in the same place forever."

"I guess that's a good way to look at it," Jordan said, leaning down to gather her ritual tools. By the time she looked up again, the room was empty.

# TWENTY-FIVE

*Three Months Later*

THE EQUINOX FESTIVAL seemed like it was a thousand years away, and Jordan’s life had changed so drastically in the time that had elapsed since then that she scarcely recognized it. The police had found Susan’s body even though they hadn’t been able to trace the former police officer beyond Pennsylvania, where he’d last used his credit card. The official story was that he had finally given up on his wife and decided to pull the plug before he cut town. Whenever Jordan came close to regretting her decision to accept Hermes’ offer, she’d catch a glimpse of the veterinarian who scarcely knew or cared that she existed and remember why it was worth it. Because Hermes had kept his promise, Darren could keep living his life—even if Jordan was no longer a part of it.

Once word spread about Ellie’s diagnosis, the fervor that had only just begun to die down around Jordan was reignited with a vengeance. Her apartment had become something of a waiting room for human and animal patients alike over the past three months. In the beginning, Jordan had assumed it would make life in Cold Creek even more difficult, but Hermes insisted it was the perfect opportunity to flex her atrophied magic. Jordan's knack for predicting tragedy had the ability to repel about as many folks as it attracted, and some folks said the witch herself was a bad omen.

She wasn't inclined to argue with them.

"You're sure this will work?" asked the young hipster seated on Jordan’s sofa. The woman had brought the Yorkie on her lap all the way from Boston on the suggestion of a friend of a friend whose Labrador Jordan had healed

the month before. People trusted her more with their animals than their own ailments, it seemed. Mrs. Herrin was far from pleased.

"As long as you give him one of those vials tonight and then another a week from now on the full moon, I think you'll find his next scan at the vet will be clear," Jordan said with newly earned confidence.

"How much do I owe you?"

"No charge," said Jordan.

"You do all this for free?" the woman asked doubtfully.

Jordan smiled as the white cat leaped down from his perch on the windowsill and trotted across the room, setting the Yorkie off again.

"I wouldn't say it's free exactly," she mused. "But I don't charge the people I help. All I ask is that you're discerning in who you choose to tell about my services."

The woman gave her a strange look as she deposited the Yorkie in her designer purse along with the small paper bag containing the tincture Jordan had given her. "If this works, I'm not sure what to think."

Jordan laughed. "That makes two of us. Have a good trip," she said, patting the little dog's head. It growled and she barely pulled her hand away in time to avoid the snap of its needlelike teeth.

Once her guests were gone, Jordan closed the door and turned around to find Hermes standing not far off in his human form, dressed only in the suit the devil gave him. "You've got a ways to go before you earn your animal whisperer badge."

"I've always been more of a cat person," she said dryly, turning away from his naked form. "Or at least, I *was*."

"You wound me," he said, suddenly standing behind Jordan. She shivered as he swept her hair over her shoulder and trailed a slender finger along her neck. "And here I thought we'd gotten close."

By the time she turned around, Hermes was wearing jeans that rode low on his hips and left his lean chest and torso exposed. They looked oddly casual on him, even though Jordan was fairly certain from the designer label on the waistband that they had cost more than anything she owned.

"Can't you do something about that? I'd prefer not to get flashed every time I turn around." Not that the view was unpleasant. The demon was packing heat proportionate to the size of his ego. "I'd be happy if you just wore pants on a regular basis."

"You'd be the first witch to complain about that."

"I'm sure," she muttered, opening another box she still hadn't had time to unpack. She could feel Hermes watching her and turning around confirmed it. "What?"

"You're being even saltier than usual, and it's been a perfectly pleasant day, so something must have happened. Let me guess, you ran into the vet again?"

"No," Jordan muttered. There was no getting anything past him. She thought of brushing it off, but the truth was that something had been nagging at her since the hospital and if Hermes wasn't going away, there was no point in keeping it bottled up. "I know taking Susan's life wasn't just about saving Darren. I know it was a ritual."

"I see the dead broad was chatty," Hermes said casually. "Would it have mattered if I'd told you at the time?"

She hesitated. "No, but it would have been nice to know. She said there are four more."

"That's right. Five rituals, and five lovers. The powers that be are big on mathematical symmetry."

"Five lovers?" she echoed, turning to face him since the clothes were now the last thing on her mind. "What are you talking about?"

"I told you, you're going to become the Whore of Babylon. How'd you think you were going to earn the name?"

"I'm a virgin!" She never thought that would be something she yelled aloud to a practical stranger, but alas, Hermes had a way of eliciting all sorts of uncharacteristic reactions. The angrier she was at him, the easier it was not to think about the fact that he looked like a walking advertisement for sin.

"That's part of the appeal. I mean, do you have any idea how hard those are to come by these days?" he scoffed. "You're practically an apocalyptic lottery ticket."

"What does any of this have to do with the apocalypse?"

"For a former preacher's kid, you should brush up on your Bible lit. The Whore of Babylon is the harbinger of the apocalypse," he said in a condescending tone. "That makes her an incredibly powerful weapon. Whoever *starts* the apocalypse has the advantage, don't you think?"

Jordan's stomach filled with dread. She knew that Hermes' motivations were far from pure, but she hadn't counted on him using her to bring about the literal end of the world. She didn't have *that* much power to exploit.

“You’re a demon. Shouldn’t you *want* the world to continue so you can keep, you know, tempting people?”

He laughed. “Now you’re catching on. Lucy and the Archangel Michael are both rushing toward the finish line, but me? I’m a free agent, and I’d like to keep this hunk of sin and degradation turning for as long as possible. That and I certainly wouldn’t mind a better parking space in Hell,” he mused.

“So…you’re trying to *save* the world?” Jordan asked doubtfully. Hermes didn’t seem like the type who’d save a single life if it didn’t serve him.

He grimaced distastefully. “You make it sound so *altruistic*. All I’m trying to do is ensure that I can maintain the lifestyle I’ve become accustomed to over the last few thousand years. You little mortals are an endless source of entertainment, and if I save a few billion of you in the process, so be it.”

Jordan arched an eyebrow. He was either putting on a good show or he really was as hedonistic as he liked to pretend. Either way, it seemed he wasn’t the worst being she could have fallen prey to in her time of need. “So by contracting me, you’re just making sure that I don’t fall into the hands of Michael or…Lucifer?” Even though she’d been conditioned to fear the devil all her life, saying his name out loud felt ridiculous.

“More or less. Of course, the job’s not done yet. Now you’re on Heaven’s radar, which means Lucifer’s sure to find out about you soon enough.”

“I don’t understand… why didn’t they know about me before?”

“Like I said,” he continued in an impatient tone, “You’re destined to *become* the Whore of Babylon. No less than fifty others have been in your shoes. Until certain choices are made that set your destiny into motion—such as selling your soul—it’s all just potential. Most potentials live and die without ever being recognized because they never made a choice that would qualify them for the position.”

“You make it sound like an office job…”

“It is in a sense. So is the Antichrist.” He shrugged. “That title’s a bit more mutable than Whore, since there can only be one before the end of the world, but it’s the same premise. Certain humans have the potential to become the Whore, but what separates them from you is…me.”

“If you want to prevent the apocalypse and contracting with you is what put me on Heaven’s radar, then why not just let me continue living my life in ignorance? Why set all of this up?” she demanded, gesturing around the room.

“Because the other side got to you first. In case you haven’t noticed, your life is kind of a clusterfuck,” Hermes said flatly. “Your father was working with an angel who knew what you had the potential to become. You escaped, but he would have found you eventually.”

Jordan’s throat tightened at the mention of the golden-haired angel who haunted her dreams. “If he knows about me, then they already know where to find me.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that. The good news is, Cold Creek is protected.”

“By what?”

“By me. I’ve been searching for you a good long time, so I’ve had plenty of time to set the stage. The entire town is warded, so as long as you don’t leave, Heaven and Hell can’t touch you.”

“Warded?” Jordan frowned. “You were never going to let me leave, were you?”

“Of course not. Not after it took this long to hunt you down. And can you blame me? Your little trip into Northampton didn’t go so well, did it?”

Jordan gulped. “You were there. You were the man in the sweatshirt at the movie theater.”

“Of course. Can’t say I approve of your taste in film, but your little freakout in the cemetery made up for it.”

“Back to the angel,” Jordan muttered. Thinking too much about what Hermes had and hadn’t seen was giving her a headache. “If he’s known me from birth, why hasn’t he reported me to Michael and the others?”

“Because he doesn’t play for their team. Not anymore.”

Jordan’s eyes widened. “You mean my father is working with *Lucifer*?”

“Talk about having friends in low places, huh?” He smirked. “Be glad I got to you first.”

For the first time, she actually was. Jordan turned to walk into the kitchen for a drink. When she turned around, Hermes was already there with a glass and a bottle of champagne she hadn’t bought in his hand. “I don’t blame you for being overwhelmed. It’s all a bit much to take in, but I *did* try to ease you into it.”

“You lied to me and cornered me into selling my soul to save the man I love,” she muttered, taking the glass from him.

“I didn’t lie. I withheld certain elements of the truth you weren’t ready to accept.”

“I’m still not,” she admitted. “Especially not the five lovers part.”

“Consorts, or a different kind of familiar, if you prefer. Just know that with each ritual you complete, consummated with each lover, you'll be one step closer to awakening to your full potential. Once you can rightly call yourself the Whore of Babylon, raising the dead is going to be a cake walk.”

Jordan’s heart stopped in response to his words. “Wait… If killing Susan was one of your rituals, does that mean Darren is part of this?”

“I thought so, but sadly, no,” he said in a surprisingly sympathetic tone. “I was wrong and that’s not something I say lightly.”

Jordan’s heart sank, but she reminded herself that this apocalypse business was the last thing Darren would want any part in. Especially if it involved sharing her with five other men. “So if Darren’s not on the list, who is?”

“Can’t say for certain. I only know that when the time is right, they’ll show up here and you’ll recognize them by the light of the full moon. Destiny and all that. But I have an inkling that you might start with that dashing blond.”

“Chase?” she asked doubtfully.

"If you weren't interested in him, you wouldn't have known who I was talking about."

Jordan couldn't argue with that. “So in addition to being my one-man matchmaking service and magic tutor, you’re going to be masquerading as my cat indefinitely?”

"It's more convenient than letting your judgmental landlady think I'm your live-in boyfriend, don't you think?" A wicked grin spread across his face and he stepped forward, caressing Jordan’s fingers on the champagne glass. “Of course, if you'd prefer masquerading as *lovers*..."

This time, her heart started beating faster for a different reason. “I thought you were gay.”

"I'm grey, darling," he purred, his lips grazing her neck. She shivered and she could feel the delight pouring off of him. "Human labels don't mean much to me one way or another.”

Jordan turned to look up at him, and those green eyes were smoldering with fire that usually burned her up in a different way. “Don’t tell me you’re one of my lovers.”

“No spoilers,” he said, resting a slender finger against her lips. Everything about his touch was cool and soothing, except the heat she could feel between them… “But a little practice wouldn’t hurt.”

Jordan gasped as the demon’s lips found hers again, and this time, she had no contractual excuse for returning the kiss. The coolness of his touch soothed her aching heart in ways she didn’t fully understand about it, and there was something so strangely familiar in that kiss…

Maybe that’s where the name came from, after all. On some level, she felt like she knew him, even if her mind didn’t. It was a sensation that went beyond skin deep, and with every brush of his skin against hers, the magic hummed between them until she could scarcely tell where hers ended and his began.

He had her up on the counter so fast her head spun, his lean body pressed between her legs. Somehow, their kiss remained unbroken. His cool hands snaked up her thighs and his fingers slipped beneath her panties, grazing what was already shamelessly slick for his touch. When his fingers slipped into her, her lips unleashed a moan that he swallowed whole as he kissed her even harder.

Guilt throbbed with every beat of her heart. She was heartbroken and had just learned that she was destined to bring about the end of the world. Lust should have been the very last thing on her mind, especially when it was shared with the man she had more reason to hate than any other, but…

The sound of gravel crunching on the driveway through the window made Jordan jolt and Hermes’ green eyes flashed in irritation as he broke the kiss and looked over at the window. He muttered something unintelligible under his breath as Jordan jumped down from the counter and smoothed out her rumpled skirt. “It’s probably just Max with the mail,” she said, her pulse still rushing in her ears as she went over to the balcony. “Stay here.”

To her relief, Hermes actually listened for once. Jordan peered out through the balcony and her heart fluttered at the sight of the dark truck pulling up in the driveway.

"Darren?" she called once he got out of the truck, running her fingers through her hair as she walked down the fire escape to meet him. "What

brings you here?"

Darren didn't answer, but he waited for her by the house. When she came to a stop in front of him, he looked pointedly at her car and muttered, “Your plates are expired.”

“Thanks, but something tells me you didn’t come all the way here just to tell me that.”

After the chaos of the Equinox Festival, Darren had finally given in to Cindy's constant pressuring to run for the town council. Jordan had seen more of him on the campaign signs than she had in person. Of course, he had won the election by a landslide, including Jordan's vote.

"No, but you should still take care of it. I've been meaning to talk to you for a while, actually."

"You have?" she asked hopefully. It was wrong to hope. The less he had to do with her, the better.

"I hear that stray cat stuck around.”

Her heart sank. So he *was* just there to remind her to get her familiar his yearly vaccinations. "Yeah. Mrs. Herrin said he could stay, so I guess he’s not really a stray anymore.”

Darren grunted, which told her he had resumed the grudge he’d finally gotten over about Hermes. If only he knew…

“I’ve also heard you're seeing patients," he said in a tone that made it clear her response would be closely scrutinized.

"I'm sorry?" she asked innocently.

His eyebrows furrowed. "I know what you're doing, Jordan. It's all over town. If you’re going to go around impersonating a doctor, at least have the decency to be honest about it.”

Jordan winced at the formal address. It was one thing for Darren to hate her, but entirely another to pretend like they were strangers. “It's hardly a matter of being dishonest, *doctor,* when you wouldn't believe the truth if a giant hand came down from the sky and wrote it in the dirt.

He frowned. "What you're doing may not be illegal--the sheriff and I are still in disagreement on that--but that doesn't make it right. I'm warning you, if you don't stop the racketeering, I'll have you run out of town one way or another."

"It can hardly be racketeering if I haven't taken anyone's money," she said, folding her arms. It was hard to pretend to be angry at him when she

was just grateful to be in his presence. At least he was talking to her, even if it was only because he thought she was a con artist.

"You may not be making money off of this, but I don't believe for a second that you're not getting something out of it," he said sternly. "Something other than the joy of helping people."

"So you'll at least admit that I am helping people," she challenged. "Sarah Mullins' bulldog isn't any worse for the wear, is he?"

Darren hesitated. "That was a fluke."

"He was in the final stages of heart failure," she reminded him. "Now he's running around the dog park like a puppy."

"Stranger things have happened."

"And Stu Herbert?" she challenged. "Ian Richman's cat? How much proof do you need that I'm not your enemy?"

"What you're doing is dangerous and despicable," he growled.

"Why?"

"Because you're giving people hope!" His shoulders heaved with anger and his eyes burned with passion that had once been directed at her in a very different way. "I don't know how you're managing any of this, but the laws of nature don't just bend for nothing. Something tells me when the piper comes calling, you won't be the one paying up."

Jordan looked away out of guilt. He was right about more than he could possibly know, even if he was right for all the wrong reasons. "If there's even a chance that human or veterinary medicine could work for the people who come to me, I turn them away. All I'm doing is giving a little more time to the lost causes," she said quietly. "The ones even you can't help."

He clenched his jaw and seemed about to argue when something behind her caught his attention. Jordan turned around in time to see the white cat trotting toward them. "How did you get out?" she asked through gritted teeth, lifting him into her arms.

"So it really is him," muttered Darren. When he reached out, Hermes hissed and lashed his tail. Jordan pushed the vet's hand away in time to keep him from getting scratched.

"Sorry," said Jordan, stroking the cat's fur and trying not to smile. "He's not fond of strangers."

Darren pulled his hand back, clearly startled. "Can't say I've had that problem before. Cats usually like me."

"He's... protective."

"I don't understand how he doesn't even have a scar after the attack," Darren said, eying the cat with cautious intrigue. "But it's definitely the same cat you took from my office. What did you do?"

"You know what I did. You just don't want to believe it."

Darren ran a hand through his hair. It had been getting shaggy as of late. He looked pale, too. Jordan couldn't help but worry it was a side effect of coming back from the dead, but Hermes insisted he was fine. "Look, I came here to talk to you, not to yell at you."

"No? You could have fooled me, what with all the yelling."

"You push my buttons," he admitted, watching her for a moment. "More than just about anyone I've ever met."

Jordan's lip twitched. "I've been told I have that effect on people. Guess that's why we broke up."

Darren sighed. "Look, just do me a favor and send the next person who comes to you looking for a miracle cure for their poodle to me, alright? There's no need for you to get into trouble."

"Something tells me if I was eligible for trouble it would have found me already, Doctor," she said dryly as Hermes rubbed his furry cheek against hers.

Darren's eyes narrowed. "Just because you're getting away with whatever it is you're doing for now doesn't mean your luck won't run out, Jordan. Remember that."

"I will," she said, watching as he headed back to his truck.

Darren paused with his hand on his truck. "Oh, and there's one more thing."

"Yes?" she asked hopefully.

"You be sure and bring him in to see me before the month is out," he said, pointing at the cat. "There's an ordinance in this town that says all pets have to be vaccinated and he's a nasty one. The last thing we need is him spreading a plague."

Jordan stroked the cat's fur to calm him as he let out a low growl of warning. "I'll get right on that."

Darren seemed to want to say something else, but he didn't. He got back in his truck and took off down the road that led into town, leaving Jordan alone with her irate familiar. She opened her arms and let him drop onto the gravel. He flew up the stairs ahead of her and before she could even shut the door to her apartment behind her, the white cat was a man again.

"If he comes at me with that needle it's going where the sun don't shine," Hermes fumed.

"You're the one who takes the form of a rabies vector. Monday morning, you're going to take one for the team and get inoculated before you make my life even more complicated."

"You say complicated. I think what you really mean is *better*."

Jordan pretended to think about it. "Hm, nope. Definitely meant complicated. And worse."

"You didn't seem to feel that way ten minutes ago when I had my hand __"

"Okay, that's enough," she snapped. "That was a momentary lapse in judgment, that's all."

"Oh, really? And your one-eighty has nothing to do with the doctor's visit?"

"Of course not," she muttered.

"Suck it up, buttercup," said Hermes, his green eyes flashing with mischief. "It only gets harder from here, but the good news is that the road to hell is paved with good sex. A night out will make you forget all about average height, dark and handsome."

Jordan sighed. "I'll do what you ask as long as you help me bring mom and Ezekiel back, but I don't have to enjoy it."

That infuriatingly wicked smirk spread across his face again. "Spoken like a true virgin," he said knowingly. "Hang onto that holier-than-thou attitude while you can. It's cute, but we'll see how long it lasts. You're already starting to awaken to your true purpose."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know the job title. You wouldn't have been chosen as a potential candidate if you didn't match the description on some level."

Jordan's face flushed. "So you're saying I'm going to start acting like the biggest slut in human history because of my special destiny?"

"I'm saying your magic isn't the only thing you've been repressing. Your path has already been chosen for you. Might as well try to enjoy it and start living your life in the process."

"If you think I'm going to come over to the dark side because of sex, drugs and rock and roll, I think you're going to be waiting a long time," said Jordan.

Hermes chuckled. "No, dear girl. Revenge, sex, drugs, those are all the vices of the weak. *I* chose *you* because you're going to fall for the same reason I did."

She frowned. "And what is that?"

"The greatest vice of all." He leaned in, an amused glint in his eyes. "Love."

# TWENTY-SIX

IT TOOK LITTLE MORE than a week for Hermes’ constant pleading to wear down Jordan's willpower and she found herself in the middle of the New York City night club he had spirited them off to. Supposedly, the silver ring he’d given her to wear on her right hand would keep them from attracting any unwanted attention of the supernatural kind, even though they were past the safety of Cold Creek.

Jordan slipped through the packed dance floor, close to hyperventilating as she was pressed closer into the crowd of strangers than she had ever been to a loved one. Sweat gleamed on taut bodies clad scantily in tight fabric that barely would have passed for clothing on the street. Jordan wasn't sure how some of them had even made it to the club without getting arrested.

Hermes was supposed to be behind her, but she wouldn't have been surprised if he had disappeared altogether. She had given into his nagging in a moment of weakness, but the lights and the pounding house remix of a song she had grown to hate in the span of two minutes were starting to bring her back to her senses.

To Jordan's amazement, Hermes had managed to navigate the crowd and make it to the bar before she did. He offered a hand to help her onto the stool he had saved for her and she climbed up carefully to avoid giving a show to the stranger who was already staring at her from the other end of the bar. Hermes insisted that the short faux leather skirt she was wearing was a symbol of freedom, but she had never felt more restricted.

"I ordered us some drinks," he yelled, barely audible over the music even though he was only a few inches away.

*Good,* she thought. She would gladly tolerate a headache in the morning if the alcohol could stave off the one brewing in her temples.

A moment later, the bartender placed two drinks in front of them. Hermes' appeared to be scotch, while hers was some sort of fruity concoction accented by an umbrella. It tasted decent, and the first few gulps gave her a pleasant buzz.

"Easy there," warned Hermes. "The night is young; you should pace yourself."

"The night is going to die young if I don't get drunk first," she muttered. She was starting to understand why her mother drank so much. When the thing you wanted most to forget was constantly thrown in your face, anything that made it easier was a plus. For Marla, that thing was a husband who was more focused on his daughter and all the money her powers brought in to his church than his marriage. For Jordan, it was the daily reminder that the only man she had ever loved couldn't stand her.

"Come on, let's go dance," Hermes suggested. "That'll lighten you up a little."

"I can't dance," she warned him.

"And here I thought that was all you Pentecostals did," he said wryly, stepping off the stool. Before she could protest, he lifted her down as well. "This isn't a purity ball, Jordan. It's just for fun, there's no technique involved. Just follow my lead."

She sighed her displeasure, but once she realized that he wouldn't be deterred until she had "fun," she let him lead her out onto the dance floor. If there was one thing she had learned in her time with Hermes, it was that it was better to just humor him until he got whatever idea it was out of his system.

As they were absorbed into the crowd, Jordan began to see what Hermes meant about technique not being important. Most people seemed to be moving for the sake of moving rather than following any preconceived steps. A good many of them were too drunk to stay upright without help, so she felt slightly less ashamed of her own awkward movements.

"You're so stiff," Hermes said with a laugh. Jordan could only hear him because he had pulled her body against his, his hand pressed against the exposed small of her back. Whether it was the alcohol or his touch, her face grew uncomfortably warm.

"What did you expect?" she mumbled. "I told you I'm not any good."

He pulled her closer than she thought possible and she found it hard to keep the image of his bare chest, which she had become far too familiar with, out of her head.

"You don't have to be good," he said, giving her a once over. "Not when you look like that."

Her blush intensified, settling any debate as to its origins. "I still can't believe you talked me into this," she muttered. "How do people 'hook up' in these places if they can't even hear each other talk?"

Hermes threw his head back and laughed. "I don't think conversation is a big factor in the mating process of the human twenty-something." He leaned in close again and scanned the crowd. "See anyone you'd like to *not* talk to?"

Jordan glanced around the crowded dance floor, hesitating. There was no shortage of good looking men of all kinds, but that peculiarly enticing breed of brooding veterinarian with smoky gray eyes was out of stock. "Not really."

Hermes grabbed her hand and pulled her off the dance floor as the pulsing remix of a vaguely familiar pop song faded into something slower. "Time for another drink," he announced.

Jordan didn't complain when the bartender placed another set of glasses in front of them. "I think I'd like to go home after this," she said, taking a sip of the blue mystery drink. Whatever it was, it worked fast. "I appreciate you trying to cheer me up and all, but I'm just not the club type."

"Sure. We'll just finish these and head back."

"Thanks," she said, surprised by his understanding. Maybe the demon wasn't as unrelenting as he seemed.

"Still thinking about the vet's new old girlfriend?" he asked.

Jordan busied herself in shredding the dampened corner of her cocktail napkin. She wasn’t even sure when Darren’s ex had come back into town, but it seemed to have taken all of two seconds for them to get back together. “It's no big deal," she lied. "I mean, it makes sense that they're back together now that she's back in town. She's more his type anyway."

"Which is?" he asked curiously.

Jordan shrugged. "Intellectual. Sophisticated. Fit."

Hermes snorted. "In other words, she’s the female version of him?"

"Opposites attract only to the point where you're not literally everything the other person stands against," she murmured. "It never would have

worked between me and Darren, not the least of all because of my father."

"Maybe," Hermes mused. She could feel his eyes on her. Judgment would have been one thing, but it was the pity that emanated from him that she couldn't tolerate.

Jordan slid off her stool and stumbled a little when her feet hit the floor. Her buzz had already faded, but the heels were making her look like a drunk. Hermes reached out to steady her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, righting herself. "I'm just going to use the bathroom before we head back."

"Alright," he said, watching her with concern. "I'll be here."

Jordan pointed herself at the neon restroom sign toward the back and hoped for the best. How anyone actually walked in these daggers was beyond her. Every step was torture. She made it toward the rear of the club, where the music was slightly less obnoxious, before her footing gave once more and she went down hard. She nearly collided with a stranger who ended up catching her.

A man, judging from the strong hands that steadied her and the solid wall of muscle she found herself up against. "I'm so sorry," she began, looking up to face her near casualty.

"Jordan?" There was familiarity in the confused voice, but the lights made it impossible to make out his features clearly. She squinted and his handsome face came into focus.

“Chase?”

He said something unintelligible and she shook her head to express that she couldn't hear him over the music. He motioned for her to follow him, so she did. A moment later, they were in the hallway that led to the club's restrooms and back offices with the dance floor still in view but almost muted.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in disbelief.

"I could ask you the same question," said Jordan. "Did someone commit a crime I should know about?"

He laughed. "No, nothing like that. I was hired as an expert witness for a case in the city, and some of the team wanted to go out and celebrate." He grimaced. "*I* voted for the opera, but you can see how well that turned out.”

"Oh," Jordan said, suddenly embarrassed about her own reason for being there. "I wish I had such a dignified excuse."

"I'll be honest, you never struck me as the clubbing type."

"I'm not," she admitted. Chase was enough of a gentleman to keep his eyes from roving, but Jordan knew she was dressed the part, thanks to Hermes. "A friend talked me into it."

"Oh?" He looked around. "Where is she?"

Jordan pointed over her shoulder. "The white-haired guy at the bar."

Hermes waved, already on his next drink. The handsome young bartender was making his best attempt to chat the demon up. *Poor kid*, thought Jordan. *He has no idea what he's hitting on.*

"Ah," Chase said, blinking. "He seems…tall."

“He’s a pain in the ass,” she blurted out. Hermes *had* to know Chase was going to be there, but Chase himself seemed none the wiser. All the more reason to get him away from the demon.

Hermes gave an awkward laugh and Jordan would have given anything for the horde on the dance floor to swallow her whole. "Well," he said, "if you weren't already here with someone, I'd invite you out for a cup of coffee and I'd be happy to give you a ride back to Cold Creek. I can't stand it here much longer myself."

"No, please, take me with you," she said earnestly. Too earnestly. To her relief, he seemed amused.

“You do look like you could use the coffee."

"Let me just go tell my friend where I'm going," she said. "I'm sure he'll be glad he can stay longer without me dragging him down.”

“I’ll be here.”

Jordan went back to join Hermes at the bar, not surprised to find he’d put away another couple of drinks while she was gone. He didn’t seem any worse for the wear, so she wondered if it was even possible for him to get drunk.

“Was that Chase Wilde?” he asked, eying the other blond.

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t know he’d be here.”

Hermes flashed her a wicked smile. “Who, me?”

Jordan rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky I find his company preferable to this,” she said, gesturing irritatedly toward the dance floor. “We’re getting coffee and then I want you to stay the hell away from him.”

“Hey, right now, anyone who’s drawn to you is a prime suspect for being a consort and Darren was a flop. You’re obviously interested and I knew you’d wait until the end of the world if left to your own devices.”

Jordan didn’t have the energy to argue. If they weren’t fooling around, it seemed they did little else, and her shame over their embarrassingly frequent encounters usually turned the one into the other. The demon’s tongue was as skilled as it was sharp… “We’ll talk about this when I get home.”

"Call me if you need anything.”

"With what, an incantation?"

Hermes arched an eyebrow. "I was thinking more along the lines of your phone."

"Oh," she said sheepishly. "Right. Well…just stay out of trouble.”

“I’d say the same to you, but the sooner you’re *not* a sanctimonious virgin, the less annoying it’s going to be to be your familiar.”

Jordan flipped him off when she was sure Chase wouldn’t see before making her way back over to him.

"All set?" he asked.

"Yeah, I was just reminding my friend not to drink too much," she said, wobbling a bit on one of the stairs.

Chase gave her a wary look. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah," she said, blushing as he opened the door. The crisp night air was a welcome jolt. “It’s the shoes more than the alcohol. I’m not *that* much of a lightweight.”

"There are certainly worse problems to have," Chase said, linking his arm in hers as he helped her down the steps outside the club. "I'm not much of a drinker myself."

"No, but I bet you don't humiliate yourself when you do drink," she muttered.

He laughed. "No, I got all that out of my system in college. Something tells me you've never done a keg stand."

"What's that?"

“Trust me, you don't want to know." He came to a stop on the sidewalk. "If I'm not mistaken, there's a coffee shop the next block over."

"I wouldn't mind the walk if you're wrong," Jordan admitted. It occurred to her as she was following a suspected murderer through the streets of New York that she probably should have at least told Hermes about his rumored past, but something told her he wouldn't have let her leave if she had. As much as she would have liked to believe that she was only with Chase because her instincts told her to trust him, there was a certain appeal in

wondering what Darren would say. Would some part of him care, even now, if he thought she was in danger?

No, she thought. Surely he was too occupied with *Allison* now.

"Well, we are in New York," Chase mused, jolting her out of her thoughts. "Throw a rock and you'll hit java. Ah, there it is," he said, nodding at the neon coffee cup sign in the distance. When they reached the little shop, he opened the door to reveal a mostly empty dining room. They took a seat at one of the tables in front and Chase pulled out her chair before shrugging out of his jacket.

"I still can't believe we ended up at the same club," said Jordan, trying to feel him out. She doubted that he knew. Hermes had a way of manipulating people without raising any red flags. Hell, he'd lured her to Cold Creek and they'd never even met.

"It is a pretty crazy coincidence," he agreed without a smidgen of pretense. "Do you come to the city a lot?"

"Not at all," she said, deciding that was a mistake as she took in all the lights outside. From what Hermes had told her, they were far from Times Square, but she couldn't imagine anything more dazzling than the area they were in. "It's beautiful, though."

"That it is," he said affectionately. "I almost went to NYU, but Boston University offered me a better package."

"What made you come back to Cold Creek after everything that happened?" She winced. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring that up."

"No, it's refreshing," he insisted. "Everyone else tiptoes around it. Truth be told, I thought I'd scared you off the night of the festival."

So much had happened that night, it was easy to forget their strange conversation. "No, you didn't. Things have just been chaotic since then."

"Yes, I'm sorry things didn't work out between you and Darren," he said in a surprisingly genuine tone. He was different when he was away from Cold Creek. Jordan could hardly blame him for that.

"Thanks," she said, pausing for a moment as the waitress came over to take their orders. "So, you were telling me about why you came back?"

"It's funny when I think about it," he said with a dry laugh. "Throughout most of high school, I told myself I was going to leave the moment I turned eighteen."

"I probably would have," she admitted. "Why didn't you?"

He shrugged. "I guess I just finally realized that my past would follow me no matter how far I ran, and running would only confirm in everyone else's mind that I was exactly who they thought I was. I figured if I stayed here and tried to help people, at least I could prove it to myself that they were wrong."

"That's brave of you," Jordan murmured.

"I wouldn't call it brave so much as stubborn. All these years later, I'm still trying to prove that I'm not who they think I am."

Jordan frowned. "Don't you ever get tired of it? It must be exhausting living under so much suspicion all the time."

"It is," he admitted, taking a handful of sugar packets out of the bowl on the table. He carefully poured each one into his coffee when it arrived. Jordan watched curiously as he folded each empty packet and set it on his saucer. He stirred the coffee that was more sugar than liquid and tapped his spoon on the edge of the cup before taking a sip. "But I have my work to keep me busy. I take cases up here in New York when there's not enough to do in town."

"I was wondering how you kept busy."

He chuckled. "Oh, you'd be surprised how much trouble small-town folks get themselves into. That isn't the only reason I stuck around, though."

"Oh?"

Chase hesitated, frowning into his cup. "This is going to sound strange, but I've always felt pulled to Cold Creek. Almost like some magnetic force was keeping me there."

"That doesn't sound strange at all," she said softly. She just hoped the force that was keeping him there was more benevolent than the one that had drawn her in. "Do you know why?"

"My parents are here, of course, but it's more than that." He cringed. "I'm sorry, all we've done is talk about me. What about you, Jordan? What does your family think of you coming here?"

Jordan's expression must have shown her sudden discomfort, because Chase looked mortified. "Oh, I'm sorry. I knew there was an accident, but I thought you might have had other family left."

"It's fine," she insisted. "I had a mother and brother, but they were killed in the accident. Everyone else was distant or passed away from natural causes. Well, everyone except my father, but we're...estranged."

"I'm sorry," he said it so earnestly that she really believed he meant them, unlike all the other passing condolences she had received.

"Thanks," she said, looking down at her hands. "It's nice that you have a good relationship with your parents. Most people don't appreciate their family until it's too late."

Chase reached across the table and placed a hand over hers. His touch was warm and reassuring. "You'll have your own one day," he said with enviable certainty.

"I don't know about that, but…thanks."

He was silent, but he seemed to be holding something back. Finally, he asked, "Are you alright?"

Jordan looked up, startled by the question. "Pardon?"

"Forgive me for the nosy question, but I can't imagine what you must be going through," he said quietly. "Breakups are hard enough, but you don't have any family here, and I'm sure it must be difficult to see Darren parading his relationship with Allison all over town so soon after you split up."

Jordan didn't know what to say at first. She took a sip of coffee in hopes of clearing the gravel in her throat.

"There I go again," Chase muttered, running a hand through his feathery locks.

"No," she said earnestly, "you didn't offend me. I'm just surprised, that's all. No one has ever asked me if I'm okay like they really wanted to know. It's nice."

He gave her a sympathetic smile, but there was none of the pity that she seemed to inspire even in Hermes. "I meant it. I know you came to Cold Creek in hopes of getting away from whatever happened in your past, and it seems like all you've found is pain. I know I wouldn't be alright if I were you."

"I'm not," she admitted. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "At least, not right now, but I think I will be. People have been kinder than I ever thought. The Danbridges and Mrs. Herrin, especially. I won't pretend it isn't hard seeing Darren with someone else, but it's not like we were together for that long. It wasn't serious or anything."

He gave her a dubious look. "Forgive me, but if I couldn't tell when I was being lied to, I wouldn't be very good at my job."

Jordan looked away. "Okay, it sucks. I fell head over heels in love with him and it kills me that he treats me like a stranger who just ran over his dog. Happy?"

"Not at all," Chase said, taking a sip of his coffee.

Now it was Jordan's turn to give him a look.

"I'm not," he promised. "I won't lie and say that Darren is my favorite person in the world or that I don't think you could do better, but it's a shame that it happened the way it did. There's no accounting for taste, I suppose."

Jordan gave him a confused look and he grinned sheepishly. "Okay, so I'm a bit biased, but I can't imagine why he would choose Allison--or anyone else, for that matter--when he could have you."

Warmth crept back into Jordan's cheeks. "You don't mean that."

"I have a reputation for many things, Jordan," Chase said, settling his gaze on her as his tone grew serious, "but saying things I don't mean isn't one of them."

Jordan gulped. She had always known Chase was charming. It was an objective fact she observed from the outside in, like the warmth of the sun or the blueness of the sky. This was the first time she had felt the full effect of that charm firsthand.

"You sure know how to cheer a girl up," she half-teased.

"You wouldn't need cheering up in the first place if I were Darren," he said matter-of-factly. "In fact, he may just have me beaten in every area except taste."

"Now you've crossed the line into flattery.”

His eyes danced. “Is it getting me anywhere?"

A smile tugged dangerously on Jordan's lips as she swirled the vanilla syrup around in her coffee. "I guess it depends on where you're hoping to go."

"If it weren't so late, I'd say back to my place to talk more," he said in a wistful tone. "But it's my responsibility to make sure you get back to Cold Creek by morning--unless you don't have to go back tonight."

"What did you have in mind?" she asked, curious.

"I'm staying at a hotel on the Upper East Side," he replied. "I mean this in the least sleazy way possible, but you're welcome to join me."

Jordan considered it for a moment, unsure if the warning voice inside her head belonged to her or to her mother. "Sure," she said, deciding it was the latter. "I just need to call my friend and let him know not to wait up."

"Great," he said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "I'll go settle the tab and we'll hop on the train."

"Sounds like a plan," Jordan said, waiting until he headed to the counter to dial Hermes' number. When he picked up, she could still hear the pounding beat of house music and the roar of voices in the club. "Hang on, let me go outside," he yelled.

A moment later, the noise of the club died down. "Hey, what's up? Is Matlock keeping his hands to himself?"

"He's being a perfect gentleman, actually," she replied. "I was just calling to let you know I'm not coming back tonight, so don't wait up."

"He's not a perfect gentleman if you're not coming home."

Jordan rolled her eyes. "It's not like that. We're just going back to his hotel to talk."

"Oh, I'm sure," Hermes said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You're a witch and he's a defense attorney. You must have *so* much in common."

"I'm not a witch," she told him for what seemed like the hundredth time. Chase was making his way back over to the table. "Look, I have to go."

"Just be careful," he warned. "And remember, I can be there in the blink of an eye if you need me."

"Not necessary, but I appreciate the sentiment. Have a good night."

"You, too." *Click.*

Jordan sighed, trying not to dwell on the fact that she had just checked in with a demon for safety. "All set?" asked Chase.

"Yeah, everything's fine," she said, taking his hand as he offered it to help her up. "So, are we really going to take the subway?"

"Sure," he said. "My hotel isn't that far, but I don't think you want to walk all the way in those shoes."

She looked down at the heels she had plans to burn when she got back to town. "Probably for the best."

The train was nearly empty when they got on, and it took her a moment to adjust to the fact that they were really underground. Being near Chase made it hard to feel anxious. After spending the last couple of years on her own, being led around by someone who knew where he was going was a comforting change of pace.

Only two stops later and Chase motioned for her to follow him off the train. He took her hand to help her off the platform.

"What's with that smile?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "It's just that my father warned me about all the 'men of the world' I would meet if I left home. I never expected to find chivalry so alive and well."

Chase laughed. "To be fair, Darren and I probably aren't the best representatives of the men of the world. We're just a couple of small-town boys at heart."

"Maybe," she agreed, placing her arm in his as he led her toward a tall building in the midst of giants. The doorman nodded to them as they passed. "Evening, Mr. Wilde."

"Tom," Chase said with a courteous nod. Jordan barely had time to admire the elegant décor of the lobby before Chase led her over to a glass elevator.

"This doesn't look safe," she said warily as they stepped inside.

"It's fine," he said in a reassuring tone, placing his hand on the small of her back. The doors closed and the elevator lurched into motion. Jordan felt ill and realized Chase was watching her.

"Not a fan of heights?"

"We just don't have many buildings like this in Arkansas."

"I'd imagine not."

The elevator finally stopped and Chase led her to a room not far down the hall. The door opened to a spacious suite that looked more like something a bride and groom would occupy on their wedding night than business trip accommodations.

"One of the perks of the job," he said, evidently noticing her surprise. "They try to schmooze you as much as they can before you go up on the stand."

"It is nice," she said, running her hand over a leather back chair. "Your work sounds exciting."

"Not as exciting as what you do," he remarked.

Jordan looked up sharply. "What I do?"

"Growing plants," he clarified. "At least you get your hands dirty. What I do is mostly paperwork and finding new ways to delay trial."

"Oh," she said, relieved. "And here I assumed it was all *Law & Order*."

"I'm afraid it's not anywhere near that exciting," he said, opening the refrigerator. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water would be great, thanks."

Jordan chose a spot on the leather couch, hesitant to take the chair. A few minutes later, Chase joined her with a bottle of water for her and one for himself.

"Thanks," Jordan said, feeling the surreality of the evening set in. When Hermes was involved, there were no coincidences, but she still couldn't believe she had agreed to go back too Chase's hotel. She wasn't afraid of him like everyone else in town and with a demon on speed dial, she had no reason to be, but it still wasn't the kind of thing she would usually do. Still, she couldn't deny the fact that she had thought less of Darren that evening than she had in months. In fact, the only times she had thought of him at all since the club were when Chase had brought him up.

"Something on your mind?" Chase asked, stretching out. Jordan didn't miss the fact that his arm draped over the couch behind her.

"Not at all," she said, relieved that it was the truth. If Darren had moved on so fast, maybe she should, too. Even if she did have to fake it.

Chase gave her a confused smile. Confusion faded into something softer after a moment and he reached out. At first, she thought it was to caress her cheek or stroke her hair, but instead he wiped something off of her cheek with his thumb.

"Eyelash," he said, holding it up on the tip of his finger. "Make a wish?"

"That's alright," she laughed, feeling like an idiot for assuming he was going to kiss her. "I could do with a little less magic in my life."

Chase blew softly and the eyelash disappeared. "I wasn't going to mention it, but you're the subject of quite a few rumors in town."

Jordan sighed. "I know. Some I'd probably be better off not knowing."

"Probably," he agreed.

"Do you believe any of them?"

"You know how I feel about gossip. Just because strange things happen doesn't mean there's not a logical explanation."

"That's a very diplomatic answer," she said. "One that doesn't really leave me with any more information than I started with."

"Sorry," he said with a laugh. "Force of habit. You really want to know what I think about Stu Herbert and Ellie Jacobs?"

Jordan nodded. She was surprised at just how much she cared what Chase thought about a lot of things.

"I think Stu Herbert hasn't been to church in as long as I've been alive, but he has enough faith in the supernatural to walk the other way when he

sees a ladder and spit over his shoulder whenever a black cat crosses his path," said Chase. “That kind of belief can make the mind capable of anything. As for Ellie Jacobs, I never underestimate the power of what a keen eye and a sharp mind can detect, even if it's subconscious. I hope that doesn't offend you."

"Not at all," said Jordan. "Your materialism is kind of refreshing."

It had quite literally taken Darren seeing her power to believe it, but his aversion to the supernatural had always felt more dogmatic than logical. Not that Jordan could blame him after what had happened to his mother. It was easier not to take Chase’s disbelief personally, since he didn’t seem particularly invested one way or another. At least he wasn’t calling her crazy or a charlatan.

"As far as the animals are concerned," he continued, "one or two might be a coincidence, but schnauzers aren't known for being particularly vulnerable to the placebo effect. I'd say you've got a gift, even if it's just a knack for picking out the right herbs."

Jordan smiled, propping her head on her hand. "Another diplomatic answer, Mr. Wilde.”

"I aim to please."

Jordan’s pulse quickened as he leaned in. Unlike before, he followed through on the gesture and pressed his lips against hers. What the kiss lacked in terms of the same magnetic spark she had shared with Darren, it more than made up for in technique. Before she could process anything, Chase’s hands were on her waist and she was pressed against his lean body. The suit did no justice to the sculpted physique underneath.

Chase’s golden hair was soft as her hands rifled through it. His strong hands roved her curves admiringly as he settled on top of her, seemingly as surprised by her reciprocity as she was by his aggression.

"If I'd have thought you'd be this receptive, I would have kissed you a long time ago," he said against her lips.

"I'm not sure I would have been," she admitted. "A lot has changed."

Chase swept the hair away from her neck and pressed his lips against her exposed skin. When his tongue flicked out to taste her, she shivered. The way he alternated between sensuous worship and hungry nips at her neck was stirring a familiar need deep inside of her. “Chase,” she moaned.

He took her utterance of his name as approval and his hand slipped underneath her shirt. She gasped as his fingertips brushed across her soft

stomach and fanned the embers of desire into a flame.

A moment later, his lips claimed hers again and he settled on top of her. Jordan wrapped her legs around his waist and drew her arms around his neck to pull him closer. His hips ground into her and the clothing between them became a glaring nuisance. As if reading her mind, he tugged her shirt off with an expert move and began exploring her exposed breasts with his tongue.

Jordan combed her fingers through his hair in approval and arched into him, desperate for more. When his hands closed around her wrists, she squirmed with anticipation that was quickly dashed by the conflicted look in his soft blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, desperate to solve whatever problem it was so they could get back to doing what he did so well.

“I’m not sure this is right…”

His words took her off-guard and no matter how she tried, she couldn’t figure them out. “I told you, I’m not drunk. I’m just a klutz.”

“It’s not that. I mean, it *would* be if you were, but…you just broke up with Darren.”

Jordan groaned as he rose off her and she muttered, “Can’t believe I’m getting cockblocked by my ex.”

Evidently, she didn’t say that as quietly as she’d hoped. Chase stared at her. “Did you just say ‘cockblocked’?”

Jordan’s face turned beet red. “I’ve been hanging around Hermes too much.”

Chase laughed apologetically and offered Jordan her partially folded shirt. “I’m sorry… I just respect you too much to let this go any further, at least until you’re in a better place.“

Jordan sat up, clutching the shirt to her chest. She was newly conscious of her flawed body and began to wonder if that was why he had changed his mind so suddenly.

As if reading her mind, Chase settled beside her on the couch and cupped her cheek in his hand. "Believe me, Jordan, this is taking more willpower than you could possibly know."

"Please don't try to spare my feelings," she murmured, combing her fingers through her tousled locks. “I’m a big girl, I can take a little rejection.”

Or a lot.

Chase swept her hair back with his other hand and forced her to hold his gaze when she tried to look away. When she finally met his eyes, the lust within them was unmistakable. "I mean it when I say that I've never wanted anything more than I want you," he said, his voice taking on a rough quality she hadn't thought him capable of. "Not just now, but ever since the very first time we met. I've grown experienced with denying myself where you're concerned, and if there's even a chance that you want me, too, I'm not going to waste it. I have to know it's real. I want more than just your body, Jordan--and I intend to savor every inch of it in due time--but I'm an all or nothing sort of man, and a patient one at that."

Jordan stared at him in shock. His words were so matter-of-fact, but there was an intensity behind them that made her think she had just begun to scrape the surface of the mystery that was Chase Wilde. It took a moment for her to find her voice. "You know, if you're trying *not* to turn me on, you're doing a bad job."

He laughed softly, breaking the tension between them. He kissed her again, this time with more restraint, but it still left her wanting more. "I'll take the couch," he said when he finally pulled away.

"There's no reason for you to sleep on the couch," she said, watching him with new appreciation for the plight of the house cat that had always yowled at the neighbor's window when she was younger.

"Until I hear from normal unheartbroken Jordan, the couch it is," he said, pulling a folded blanket over his lap as he stretched out.

Jordan sighed, collapsing on the bed. If that’s what he was holding out for, he was in for a long wait.

Hermes was never going to let her hear the end of this.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

THE RIDE HOME was even more awkward than the night before had been frustrating. Jordan did learn that Chase was a big fan of Gaelic folk music. So was she, if for no other reason than gratitude for the escape his CDs provided from what would otherwise be an incredibly awkward silence.

Jordan was now convinced that she had another neighbor to avoid at all costs, but as Chase pulled up to Mrs. Herrin's house, he finally turned to face her. "What do you say we agree to take a Mulligan on last night and you let me take you out this Friday?" he asked. "I'd hate for that to count as our first date."

Jordan stared at him for a moment in shock. Maybe it was the pounding in her temples, but she found it hard to comprehend that he wanted to see her again at all.

"Not that there would be others," he added quickly. "I didn't mean to presume."

"No, that's not it," said Jordan. "I'm just surprised you want to go out again after I humiliated myself last night."

"You're not the one who humiliated yourself," he said with a sigh. “That was all me.”

"Well, I don't really know what a Mulligan is," she admitted, "but I'd love to see you again."

It was the truth. It certainly hadn't been a matter of love at first sight with Chase, but he made her feel things she hadn't thought she was capable of after her breakup with Darren.

"Great," he said eagerly. "I'll swing by around seven to pick you up. How does dinner and dancing sound?"

"Sounds great," she lied. At least the dinner part sounded great. Hopefully her dread of dancing would help keep her distracted from Darren and Allison's very public relationship for the rest of the week. She slipped out of the car and noticed the white cat watching them from the upstairs window. "I'll see you then."

Chase's Mercedes pulled out of the gravel lot and, if its pristine condition was any indication, Jordan knew he was making a sacrifice by exposing his car to all the dust just to drop her off at the front door. She had half a mind to sneak in through the fire escape as a detour on the walk of shame when Mrs. Herrin came around the side of the house, wearing her gardening gloves and holding a dirt-covered spade. "Was that Chase Wilde?" the older woman asked in obvious disapproval.

"It was," Jordan said, knowing the more upfront she was the less Mrs. Herrin would pry. "We ran into each other in New York and he gave me a ride."

"Oh, I'm sure he did," the woman said, looking her up and down.

"Mrs. Herrin," Jordan groaned, wandering toward the house. She might not have been willing to call herself a witch, but the sunlight was starting to make her feel like a vampire.

"Don't Mrs. Herrin me," she huffed, following Jordan closely. "If that sleazeball took advantage of you --"

"He didn't," Jordan said firmly. "Quite the opposite. I flung myself at him, he politely rebuffed me because he didn't think I was 'emotionally ready' after my breakup, then tucked me into bed while he slept on the couch. Not much of a sleazeball if you ask me."

Mrs. Herrin gave her a dubious look but shooed Jordan away from the stairs that led up to her apartment. "Come on, you can afford to sit for a minute. It's not witchcraft, but there's a hangover cure that's been passed down for so many generations in my family that it might as well be."

Jordan felt her face redden as Mrs. Herrin ushered her into a chair at the table. "I had like one drink, I'm not hung over. And I don't do witchcraft."

Mrs. Herrin rolled her eyes. "When you've got folks coming from all over the place to pester you for herbs and tinctures, that's what it's called. I've been around long enough to know. If you're gonna open up a dang Botanica upstairs, the least you could do is tell your landlord."

"I'm sorry," Jordan said, watching as the woman heated a pot on the stove. "It started out as a few favors and it kind of escalated."

"It always does." Mrs. Herrin snorted. "My mama moved here to be with my daddy when she was barely sixteen, but *her* mama lived way up in the Appalachians. She was always brewing up some home remedy or fixing some fella who ran off on his wife and kids. Nothing like some good old mountain magic."

"Really?" Jordan asked, wide-eyed. "Why didn't you carry on the tradition? You don't seem very religious."

The woman scoffed, tossing an herb even Jordan didn't recognize into the pot. "I'm not. My mama got away and wanted damn near nothing to do with her country upbringing, but she passed on a thing or two. Wouldn't call it magic exactly, but she taught me enough about herbs and the like that I could get by. That's how I knew what you were up to when you moved in with all those plants."

"You knew that long ago?" Jordan asked in disbelief. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Didn't think it was any of my business and I still don't," Mrs. Herrin said, straining the mixture through a colander. "That is, as long as you don't start bringing zebras and cuttlefish up there next."

Jordan laughed a little as Mrs. Herrin placed a mug of the mixture in front of her. "I won't, I promise. Thank you for being so understanding," she murmured. "But I really don't consider myself a witch at all."

Mrs. Herrin sat across from her and gave her a look. "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck --"

"It's a witch," Jordan said with a sigh.

"Bingo. Why are you so hung up about it anyway?"

Jordan considered her question for a moment. "I had a very religious upbringing," she said carefully. "My father was a minister."

"So your parents forbade it?"

Jordan shook her head. "No, they encouraged it. Certain parts, anyway. Daddy always said I had the gifts of healing and prophecy. He was happy as long as I used them for his ministry. As for the things he couldn't use, that was a different story altogether."

"Your father sounds like a prick," said Mrs. Herrin.

Jordan nearly choked on her tea.

"Well, he does," the woman snorted. "I never trust a preacher man further than I can throw him."

"I like to think my father is more the exception than the rule," Jordan said, looking down at her nearly empty mug. "This is really good. My headache is better already."

"Of course it is," Mrs. Herrin said matter-of-factly. "A Herrin woman never sets about something she can't do well."

A timer rang from the stove and Mrs. Herrin hopped up to turn it off.

"Did you leave something in the oven?" asked Jordan.

"No, that's just my reminder to go into town before the market closes. I need to pick up a few things."

"I could go for you."

"Shouldn't you be crawling into bed?"

"I doubt more sleep is going to help anything your cure couldn't fix," Jordan admitted. "Besides, the fresh air would be nice."

Mrs. Herrin hesitated. "I know you avoid going into town now that Darren is running around with that harpy."

"I can't hide forever," said Jordan. "Besides, Allison doesn't seem that bad."

Mrs. Herrin gave her a look. "*You* haven't known her all her life like I have. The girl had a plan to marry rich before she was out of a booster seat. As much as I was sad to see Darren get his heart broken, I was relieved he dodged that bullet. Least, I thought he had."

"I'm bound to run into them sooner or later," said Jordan, reminding herself that she had forfeited the right to any concerns about Darren's love life when she allowed Hermes to erase his memories. "I might as well get your groceries while I'm at it."

Mrs. Herrin sighed and rummaged through her purse for a small list and a wad of cash. "If you're set on going, I won't stop you."

Jordan took the list and smiled. That was about as close to a thank-you as Julia Herrin ever got. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, that's it, but pick yourself up a scratching post while you're there, will you?"

"Why?" Jordan asked, frowning.

"That damn cat's been making all sorts of noise up there," said Mrs. Herrin. "Poor thing's probably goin' stir crazy being cooped up after being a stray for so long."

"Yeah, poor thing," Jordan muttered, casting a disparaging glance up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry about the noise, I'll be sure to take care of it."

"You might wanna change before you head into town." Mrs. Herrin gave Jordan's outfit another disapproving scowl, but a wicked grin soon replaced it. "Maybe not the skirt, though. Wouldn't hurt for Darren to see you in that."

Jordan turned red. "Mrs. Herrin," she scolded, trudging up the stairs. When she opened the door, Hermes was sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by piles of freshly cut wood and tools.

"What the hell is all this?" she demanded, quickly shutting the door behind her. "I'm gone for one night and you take up carpentry?"

Hermes glanced up at her with a mischievous grin and an appeasing slow blink. Sometimes he acted like a cat even when he wasn't. "I learned from the best. I'm building you an altar."

"You're building a case for a noise violation citation is what you're doing," she said, crossing her arms. "Since when do I need an altar?"

"Since you're going to have to do more than garden witchcraft if you plan on raising the dead," he said flatly. "Hangups aside, it's about time you learned the basics."

"Why do you have to build it, anyway? I thought the whole point of you making a contract with me was so you could do your magic tricks. Can't you just blink and get something from the IKEA in Hell?"

"I could," he said in a casual tone, "but magic is all about the intent behind it. A handmade altar has a lot more power than something I simply willed into existence."

"Oh. That's touching in a weird way," Jordan admitted, going over to the sink to wash last night's makeup off her face. She hesitated before deciding to go ahead and put on a bit of tinted lip balm, telling herself it had nothing to do with the possibility of running into Darren. She mostly succeeded as she slipped into a less revealing top and a more sensible pair of shoes.

"Heading into town to do grandma's errands?" asked Hermes.

"Yes, and this time I'd like to go alone."

"Why?" Jordan couldn't see the demon, but she could hear the sneer in his voice. "Afraid the vet will get jealous and run back into your arms if he sees you out and about with such a dashing fellow?"

"Hardly," she said, rolling her eyes. "I just need to lie low for a bit and you kind of attract attention."

"Can't argue there," he said with a wistful sigh. "Fine, go alone, but I want to hear all about the lack of hot lawyer sex when you get back. You

have no idea how many legal puns I've come up with while you were gone."

Jordan gave him a suspicious look. "What makes you think nothing happened?"

"Oh, please," he huffed. "As if I couldn't already spot a virgin from a mile away, you still give off that heady aroma of sexual frustration and self-consciousness."

Jordan groaned. The worst part was that he was right, and she was beginning to think that her virginal status wasn't going to change any time soon. "See you soon," she muttered, pausing in the doorway. "Do me a favor and don't put any holes in the floor while I'm gone. And try to keep it down or Mrs. Herrin is going to turn me in for animal cruelty."

"No promises," Hermes said, turning back to his project with renewed focus. "One person's hole in the floor is another person's skylight."

# TWENTY-EIGHT

JORDAN MADE it into town without incident. Save for Alec the butcher, she didn't even run into anyone else she knew by name. Of course, she wasn't at all surprised when her luck changed at the checkout line.

There they were, two spots ahead in line. Allison was leaning on Darren, whispering something in his ear that cracked the cold veneer of his expression. She looked as impossibly trim and leggy as ever in a form-fitting yet tasteful blue dress. Jordan instantly regretted the decision to wear such a tight skirt and found herself eying the garbage bags in the next aisle over. She had left her apartment feeling curvy and sexy, but now she was acutely aware of the way her skirt exposed her soft thighs and clung to her stomach where Allison's dress glided over taut abs.

She probably had a six pack under there. She and Darren were probably going to go home and rip each other's clothes off to have hard, pointy, fit people sex like they did in the movies.

Jordan slowly backed out of the line and decided to spend the next ten minutes in the shampoo aisle just to be sure they were gone. Unfortunately for her, fate--or Tina, who seemed to be its favorite stand-in--had other plans.

"Jordan!" the woman squealed as she breezed into the market through the newly installed automatic doors that had momentarily usurped Chase’s checkered past and Jordan's occult pastimes as the current talk of the town. "And here I was beginning to wonder if you'd run away."

The fight or flight instinct took over and it was all Jordan could do to keep herself from running. Much like a tigress in the wild, there was no escaping Tina once she had you in her sights and it was too late for Jordan.

All eyes at the front of the store were drawn to the source of the noise out of mere curiosity--all eyes including Darren's and Allison's.

"Hi, Tina," Jordan answered in a much lower voice, hoping Tina would follow her lead and quiet down.

She could hear Darren speaking with the young cashier and hoped that maybe Tina pulling her aside could work to her advantage. He was less enamored with her than ever since she had ignored his warnings about seeing patients, but hopefully he wouldn't confront her publicly in front of Tina and Allison.

Tina looked her up and down in shock and Jordan decided then and there that she was going back to knee-length skirts and sweater sets. She had never been gawked at so much in her life as she had been from the moment Chase had stuffed her into a miniskirt.

"Are you going out?" Tina asked rather loudly, casting overtly confused glances between Jordan's outfit and her basket of mundane items. "I've never seen you so dolled up."

"No, I actually just got back from New York." Lying in a small town when it wasn't absolutely necessary was a dangerous game. After all, it was likely that Chase would mention their encounter in New York to someone sooner or later. It was exactly the kind of strange coincidence people liked to share at the water cooler. Unless, of course, he was ashamed to let anyone know that he had been with her. That was always a possibility, and it took hold easily in Jordan's heightened state of self-awareness.

"New York?" Tina squealed. Jordan decided that she should have taken the chance and lied. Oh, how she wished she had lied. "That's so exciting, you have to tell me all about it!"

"I'd love to," said Jordan, casting a nervous glance at the register. Darren was still arguing with the cashier about something, and the exchange seemed to be growing heated, at least on his end. Allison was staring openly at Jordan and Tina. "We'll have to get coffee soon."

"Oh, we can talk right here," Tina said, putting her hand on Jordan's arm to keep her there. "The store isn't closing for another twenty minutes."

"Great," Jordan said through clenched teeth. "And here I thought it was later."

"So, what were you doing in New York?" Tina asked. If Darren hadn't heard her before, he certainly had now. He glanced up, momentarily distracted from his argument with the cashier.

"I uh, went to a nightclub in the city with a friend," said Jordan.

"A nightclub? Oh, I've heard they're fabulous out there. Of course, a woman my age going would be pathetic," she said with a short laugh. "What was it like?"

"There were plenty of people 'your age,' Tina, don't be ridiculous," Jordan said, stealing a glance in the direction of the checkout. Why hadn't they left yet? "It was just loud and full of drunk people. Not really my thing."

"Sounds fun," Tina mused.

"Probably to most people," Jordan admitted. "I don't think I'd do it again, but you should go sometime. I think you'd like it."

"Maybe I will," Tina said, pondering it for a moment. "So this friend of yours, would he happen to be that tall drink of water with the white hair you're always going around town with?"

Jordan told herself it was just a coincidence, but the low murmur of Darren's argument with the cashier came to a halt at that exact moment.

"That's him," Jordan said carefully. "We're just friends, though." Friends with benefits and a soul contract, but Tina didn't need to know any of that.

"Well, I have to say, I like this new look," Tina said, giving Jordan's outfit a wistful gaze. "Oh, to be young again and have that body."

"Tina, you're not that much older than I am," Jordan reminded her. "And you look great."

Darren had gone back to bickering with the cashier. The man behind him was starting to grumble unhappily about the wait.

Even Tina was beginning to get distracted by the holdup in the line. Jordan cast a timid glance in Darren's direction only to find him leaning over the conveyor belt, exchanging some very heated words with the wide-eyed cashier. It was unlike him to get upset with a retail employee, so Jordan couldn't help but look on in confusion.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I *have* to call for a price check," the cashier said, gripping the microphone at the register.

Darren's hand shot out to cover the microphone. "I told you, just charge me for the most expensive brand you carry," he said, pushing the slow, deliberate words through gritted teeth in a tone that said, "I'm trying so hard not to make it obvious how much I hate you right now." Jordan knew it well, because he had used that tone with her more than once since they had broken up.

"Sir, I really can't do that," the girl said with all the insistence of someone who was going by the book because it was her first serious job. She took the microphone and leaned in to announce, "Price check on ultra-ribbed condoms, register four."

Darren cringed violently. Allison rested a consoling hand on his shoulder, but she didn't look at all mortified as she cast a sideways glance in Jordan's direction.

Tina was obviously trying to stifle a giggle, but her efforts were futile.

Jordan looked away, hoping to save Darren from the gawking of at least one set of eyes. Judging from the knowing chuckle of the man behind them in line and the salacious murmurs of the other customers, everyone now understood the cause of the holdup.

When the manager came over, Darren muttered something unintelligible yet venomous.

"I'm so sorry," the manager said, taking the box and tapping something into the register. "That'll be seventeen thirty-one."

Darren shoved what looked like a twenty into the manager's hand and snatched the plastic bag before leaving the register.

"Sir, you forgot your change!" the hapless cashier called after him.

"Keep it," the vet growled. He made eye contact with Jordan for a brief moment before he stalked out the door with Allison close behind him. At least *she* seemed to think it was hilarious.

Jordan stared after them in bewilderment. Certainly she could understand his embarrassment, but some of that had to come with the territory of being a virgin, which Darren St. Clair most certainly was not. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why he would be so upset. They were just condoms and despite Jordan’s best attempts at denial, it was no secret to anyone that he and Allison were hot and heavy.

"Looks like we know what they'll be doing tonight," Tina said, still giggling. "Wonder what that was all about."

"I have no idea," Jordan murmured, getting into line. Of all the possible scenarios she had imagined for her first official encounter with Allison, that one hadn't even been on the list.

"You'd think he was a fifteen-year-old caught stealing his mom's hand lotion," Tina said with a snort. "Oh, well. I guess some people are just more private than others. I know how that is."

"Mhm," Jordan said, giving her a dubious look. Self-awareness was not the woman’s greatest strength.

"Well, I'd better get my things, I think they're closing in a minute," said Tina, touching Jordan's arm. "Call me soon about that coffee!"

"I will," she promised, deciding to schedule it before her date with Chase. If she went out with him without telling Tina or Cindy, she knew she'd never hear the end of it.

The cashier was still talking with the older man about the condom incident by the time Jordan arrived at the register. "I just don't know what his problem was," the girl said to Jordan, as if continuing the same conversation she’d been having with the last customer. "I was just following the rules."

"I'm sure he was just having a bad day," Jordan reassured her, helping the girl bag Mrs. Herrin's groceries. "I wouldn't worry too much about it."

"Maybe it's because my dog peed on him last week," the clerk mused.

Jordan's lip twitched. "I don't think that's it."

"Oh, well," she said, shrugging. "Forty-one fifty-six!"

Jordan offered her Mrs. Herrin's cash and slipped the change into the bag. "Thanks, Becky," she said, glancing at the girl's name tag.

Becky waved as Jordan headed out the door. She really did try not to look up at the apartment of the vet clinic, but his and Allison’s silhouettes stood out against a backdrop of yellow light so sharply that it was hard not to. Darren's silhouette was instantly recognizable even though he stood still and appeared to have his arms crossed in agitation. Allison's was considerably more animated, and from the way she was waving her hands, it was obvious they were having a fight.

Jordan made it back to the house and dropped off Mrs. Herrin's groceries, managing to escape a long conversation since the landlady was already on the phone. Her friend Mercy had already called to gossip about the drama she had just witnessed at the store. Jordan braced herself for an ambush from Hermes but was even less prepared for the sight that was waiting for her in the apartment.

The demon's lithe form was stretched out languidly on the floor amid a sea of excess construction materials and, judging from the uncharacteristically benevolent way his features were set, he was fast asleep. When he looked like that, it was a little easier to remember that he had once been a servant of God, before his infernal career change.

Jordan shivered and decided not to follow that train of thought too far. She walked over to the low wooden table he had built so painstakingly with his own hands and marveled at the smoothness of the unstained wood. The fact that Hermes was capable of such exquisite craftsmanship came as no real surprise to Jordan considering that he had been manipulating the inner workings of her life for quite some time. His energy hummed through the wooden altar as she ran her hand over it.

He must have enchanted it. She could only imagine what perversions of nature he was going to command her to accomplish on the damn thing, but for the moment, it was just a beautiful table.

Jordan stood and pulled a blanket off the edge of her bed, draping it over the sleeping demon. As usual, he was wearing low-slung pants and nothing else. She convinced herself that covering him up was as much for her comfort as his.

Suddenly, Hermes' green eyes flew open and he snatched her hand. Before Jordan could even shriek in surprise, he pulled her down on top of him. She found herself staring down into his emerald depths as they danced with mischief. She could only guess as to whether he had been sleeping at all or simply pretending, and why he would bother was an even greater mystery.

"I hear the vet had a temper tantrum at the store. Maybe he's the one who needs the rabies shot."

Jordan tried to pull away but Hermes' arms held fast around her waist. Despite his willowy appearance, he was a strong devil when he wanted to be. "I see you've been eavesdropping on Mrs. Herrin."

"The floorboards are thin," he said, stroking her back in consolation. "I'm not the one who built this creaky old house."

"Good, because it would probably eat us. I know you did some kind of weird black magic to that table."

"Altar," he corrected without bothering to deny it. "So tell me, what's Darren's old flame like?"

"Tall, brunette, size two," Jordan muttered. "Oh, and she looks like the progeny of a model and a movie star who had a sex contest."

"How droll," said Hermes. In an instant, Jordan was the one on her back with her wrists pinned to the floor as Hermes sneered down at her. "If you ask me, short, curvy and wide-eyed is a much more entertaining combination."

Jordan bit her lip to keep from smiling. Hermes' attention was like candy. It didn't satisfy any nutritional needs, but it was sweet while it lasted. "Don't pretend like I'm your type."

"Oh, I have a few different types where humans are concerned," he purred, successfully pinning both of her wrists with one hand. The other wandered down, trailing over the soft curve of her stomach before tracing down her hip and thigh. "I like my men with big muscles and small brains. My taste in women is far more discerning."

Jordan tried not to squirm and reveal how much he'd gotten under her skin. "Dammit, Hermes."

"Damn what, exactly? We're both headed south already," he taunted, pressing a kiss to her collarbone. She moaned, betraying her own weakness. Maybe he was right about her changing. The demon's touch had awakened needs that were either brand new or so long suppressed that they might as well have been. "You know, I'm not human. I notice things a human male would miss. The way your pulse quickens when you see me," he whispered, gliding his fingertips over her heart. His touch was colder than usual and the feel of it against Jordan's bare skin made her shiver.

"Yeah, so? You make me nervous," she muttered, absently stroking his silky hair.

Hermes turned Jordan's face toward him, forcing her to hold his gaze, which she could only assume was another one of his tricks. "I see the way those big brown puppy dog eyes steal glances at the body you supposedly find so offensive," he continued, ignoring her excuse. When his hand slipped between her thighs, her breath caught in her throat and her hips lifted off the floorboards instinctively. "The way you respond to my touch. My, Jordan, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you had a little crush."

Jordan clenched her jaw, promising herself she wasn't going to beg this time. His ego was inflated enough, and they both knew where this was headed. The same place it headed every other damn night. "Like you said, I'm a pent-up virgin. The other day a weirdly sexual insurance commercial turned me on, so I wouldn't be too flattered if I were you."

He chuckled. "Well, you do seem to have a thing for bureaucrats. Speaking of which, what happened with the lawyer?"

"Nothing," Jordan said flatly, trying to ignore the fact that his hand hadn't moved from between her legs. And trying even harder not to grind against him. "He asked me out on a pity date next week."

"Oh?" The demon tilted his head and propped himself up on one elbow, still keeping Jordan partially pinned from the side. "He didn't make a move at the hotel?"

"He did, and then he took it back."

"Hm."

"What?"

"Nothing."

“Hermes, teasing me is one thing, but I'm not in the mood for playing guessing games."

"Oh, I wasn't teasing," he said, nipping her ear as his hand slid back up her thigh, eliciting another shiver. "I was just thinking."

"Do I want to know what?"

He gave her a lazy smile and his hand disappeared beneath her skirt, stroking the silky fabric underneath. "Probably not. I wouldn't worry too much about it, and I certainly don't think he asked you out again because he pities you. Just give it time."

"Last night you were trying to convince me to lose my 'V-card to the first guy who came along and hope it triggered destiny,’” she reminded him.

"I know, but that was when it seemed hopeless. No offense."

"How am I not supposed to take offense to that?"

"I can think of a few ways to distract you," he said, kissing her. Their first kiss had occurred in the midst of chaos and had only even happened in the first place as a means to cement the contract between them. Their second had been the result of a blur of emotion and confusion. Nonetheless, all three had left Jordan wondering if the electricity she felt through his touch was the effect of Hermes’ power or something far more dangerous. She had convinced herself it was nothing more than a surge of energy, but as his cool lips brushed against hers, she realized that she was incapable of being right where he was concerned.

There was no new contract on which to blame the feelings his touch stirred within her, and after three times, she could no longer consider it a lapse in judgment. There was only his kiss, his lips against hers, and he grew bolder when she didn't push him away. Jordan was still convinced that he was only teasing her, but after Chase’s rejection and seeing Darren with Allison earlier that night, the physical affirmation was too great of a temptation to ignore. Even if she was only an experiment at best or an object of pity at worst.

Hermes’ tongue swept against her lower lip, seeking entrance. Jordan parted her lips out of instinct, but she wasn't prepared for the earnestness with which his tongue claimed her mouth. Maybe she wasn't the only one in need of a distraction.

As the demon's hands explored her body with more abandon and earnestness than she would have thought him capable of, Jordan realized how easy it would be to make the foolish mistake of believing that he wanted her the same way she wanted him—even if only for the moment.

When he crawled down her body and his head disappeared between her thighs, it ceased to matter. He slipped her panties off and she lifted her hips to let him, parting her legs far too hastily for his access. His hair swept her thighs as his mouth came down on her sex like he was starved for pussy and she moaned with the ecstasy of someone who had been touched for so much longer. The familiarity that existed between them seemed to extend to the bedroom—or the living room, in this case—because Hermes knew her body with an intimacy far greater than their time together justified.

“Oh, God,” she gasped as his tongue delved into her, his fingertips biting into her thighs to spread her further apart.

“Not even close, love,” he purred, his voice husky and hoarse with sex.

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered, even though her physical reaction to his teasing betrayed her desperation. There were far better uses for that tongue than words. He resumed his worship between her legs like he wasn’t the very definition of hellbound and by the time Jordan’s orgasm came crashing over her in ethereal waves, he was quite literally purring.

She wasn’t sure how he made that sound in his human form, but damn, it was sexy. She scarcely had time to catch her breath before he was on top of her and out of his jeans. At least most of the way. Jordan gasped in surprise as she felt his thick shaft pressed to her stomach, but she arched her hips to guide him where her body wanted him.

And why the hell not? She was twenty-five and holding onto her technical virginity seemed like a moot point. She still wasn’t even sure why she had held off so long with Darren. The only plausible explanation was that she was still clinging to the outmoded expectations that had been imposed on her by her religious parents. While she was far from accepting her role as the Whore of Babylon in any sense that went beyond the intellectual, she knew it was absurd to even think of waiting for marriage. Her contract with Hermes was the closest someone like her was ever going

to get, and while she hated him for taking her soul, he stirred other feelings just as strongly.

In a way, he was the only person she truly trusted enough to share such an intimate experience with. Did it really matter that she didn’t love him if she was destined to take five consorts she didn’t even know?

As if reading her hesitation--and quite possibly her mind—Hermes froze. Her disappointment was tempered by the unmistakable look of desperation in his eyes. She knew it only because she had seen the same look in Darren's eyes on the many occasions they had reached the no-man's land between his ability to pull back without needing a cold shower and her readiness to “go all the way.” It had flickered in Chase’s gaze for a moment before he had brought everything to a halt the night before, but this time there was no talking herself out of what she was seeing.

Hermes’ eyes were beginning to look like cracked jade with crimson veins running through the irises and the whites. His once beatific features were set in an uncharacteristic snarl and his breathing was as ragged as hers had become. His nails dug into her flesh slightly, but it wasn't the pain that alarmed her, or even the fact that his nails seemed longer and more pointed than she remembered. It was the fact that his incisors had lengthened that made her realize fully that he was turning into something else entirely. Or maybe he was just taking off the mask he wore so well.

“Hermes,” she whispered carefully, wary of setting off whatever demonic instincts their encounter had triggered. "You're hurting me."

The words took instant effect. Immediately, the demon released his grip on her and he was on the other side of the apartment before she could process him moving at all. "Are you alright?" he asked in a ragged voice she didn't recognize.

"Yeah," she said, sitting up to fix her disheveled clothing, still reeling from the combination of suspended arousal and fear. "What happened? Your eyes, they...changed."

"It's nothing," he said, already sounding more like himself as he turned around. "I just made a mistake."

His words stung more than the pain of his nails digging into her flesh ever had. He turned to face her with wide, solid green eyes that were his own once again and he seemed to understand how she’d taken those words. "That's not what I meant, Jordan."

"Don't," she said, getting to her feet. She bent down and began picking up the mess of his construction project for a distraction. "Maybe everyone else in this town pities me now, but I don't have to take that from you. Not until my time's up and you collect my soul, at least."

"Stop being a martyr," he demanded, standing in front of her suddenly. He took her by the shoulders, making her drop the small pile of discarded wood in her hands. "You know where martyrdom gets witches?"

Jordan chewed the inside of her lip, trying to call on her irritation so she wouldn't have to feel the sting of rejection yet again. "No, but I'm sure you're going to enlighten me."

"The stake," he said pointedly. "Don't think we're beyond that just because New England has traded puritanism for the Patriots."

"Stop it. You don't get to switch from playing mind games to teacher mode in two seconds flat. I'm going to get whiplash."

Hermes sighed, letting his hands fall away. "I wasn't playing games, not this time. I had every intention of seducing you tonight."

Jordan blinked at his candor. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I figured losing your virginity to me was better than an anonymous stranger at a club. Believe it or not, I care about you."

"I believe you," she admitted. "I don't believe for a second that you wouldn't hurt me if it suited your purposes, but I think you really do care in your own odd way. Probably not in the same self-destructive Stockholm Syndrome-y way I've come to care about you."

He gave her a small smile. "If that's true, then you're more damaged than I've given you credit for. I mean, I've heard of daddy issues, but you've got mommy issues, brother issues, third cousin twice removed issues --"

"Okay, I get it," Jordan snapped. "Just tell me what happened that made you start acting like you wanted to eat me in a *non* fun way so we can make sure it never happens again."

He sighed, pulling his long white hair back only to let it fall freely around his shoulders. Why did even his nervous habits have to be so appealing? "It's complicated."

"I'm a Pentecostal-turned-pagan who's in love with a guy I brought back to life with the help of a sort-of gay demon who happens to be my roommate," she said, folding her arms. "My life is *nothing* if not complicated."

"I'm *pansexual*, get a dictionary," he said with a scowl. "And you're not pagan, you're just a witch. *I'm* the only god in your pantheon, so get that straight."

"Stop deflecting and answer the question."

Hermes flopped on the edge of the bed with a dramatic sigh and Jordan covered her mouth so he couldn't see the smile tugging at her lips. For all she knew, the nightmare creature she had caught a glimpse of was the real Hermes and everything else was just a mask, but she was more than relieved to have her familiar back for the moment.

"Fine. Do you know why demons take the souls of witches when they die?"

"No," she said warily. She wasn't sure she *wanted* to know, either. Her mortal life was full of enough unexpected surprises to contend with.

"We eat you," he replied matter-of-factly, confirming her worst fear. Jordan was silent, if only because she couldn't remember any words in the English language. All the color drained from her face and he gave her an apologetic look before continuing, "Your souls, at least. That's why most witches don't age much during their mortal lifetime. No one likes a tough steak."

Jordan shuddered.

"Sorry, I forget you're a vegetarian."

"That's not why I'm creeped out, Hermes! You could have told me you planned to eat me before I put myself on the menu."

"Would it have changed your decision to sign the contract?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She hesitated. "No, but --"

"Then be glad I didn't tell you," he interrupted. "In any case, I'm *not* going to eat you. I have bigger plans."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You don't, but you're at my mercy either way."

He had a point. "What *are* you going to do with my soul, then?"

"Classified."

She frowned. "Why did you freak out earlier?"

"Just because I'm not going to eat you doesn't mean I don't want to," he said, looking her up and down appreciatively. The way his tongue swept across his lips made her shiver, but it was also arousing in an utterly

confusing way. "I guess it takes more willpower than I remembered. Then again, my other witches weren't quite as...juicy."

Jordan's gave him a halfhearted swat on the arm. "Great. I can't *give* my virginity away to a human man, but I'm chuck roast to demons."

"More like filet mignon," Hermes purred. "It's a compliment, and for the record, I had every intention of taking your virginity. The line between the different types of hunger just gets a little blurry when I'm aroused, apparently."

"Don't you have sex with humans all the time?"

"Not as much as you'd think, but it's not the same as being around a witch. Your meat is marinated in magic. Right now you're like veal, young and tender, but eventually you'll have so much magic running through your veins that --"

"Okay, enough," Jordan cried, covering her ears. "Enough meat metaphors, I think you just made me upgrade to vegan."

"They're hardly metaphors."

"Hermes!"

"Sorry," he said in a mocking little tone that made it clear he wasn't.

"If you want to make it better, just never bring it up again," she pleaded, grabbing her robe off the hook on the door.

"Fair enough. Where are you going?"

"To take a cold shower," she said flatly, gesturing to the piles of wood and supplies on the floor. "When I get out, all this had better be cleaned up."

"You're the boss," he said, a wry grin spreading across his lips, "for now."

# TWENTY-NINE

JORDAN SAT on the porch swing, trying not to think about the white cat who would probably be watching her from the upstairs window if she dared to look up. It had been a week since his confession and she wasn't sure whether she was more embarrassed that she had almost done the deed with her own familiar or horrified because the only reason the seduction hadn't worked was the fact that his desire to eat her far exceeded any other.

Avoiding Hermes had proved more difficult than avoiding Darren, considering the fact that they shared a one-bedroom apartment, but Jordan was giving it a valiant effort all the same. She had hoped her date with Chase would be a distraction and another excuse to get out of the house, but he was late. It wasn't like him to be anything other than punctual, at least as far as she could tell. Maybe he had overheard a rumor that convinced him she wasn't worth dating and he wasn't coming at all.

Part of her would be relieved, if only on his behalf, but the other part would be disappointed. As the days wore on, Darren's new relationship wasn’t getting any easier to live with and Jordan wasn’t sure she was emotionally cut out for the new casual dynamic of her fling with her familiar.

The Condom Incident had long since become old news, but Allison certainly hadn't. She went everywhere with Darren now and rumor had it she was moving in with him. At their last coffee date, Tina had gone on and on about how much of a sacrifice moving into Darren's bachelor pad must have been for someone as *posh* as Allison and how sweet it was that they were high school sweethearts reunited at last. Surely they were soulmates after all! When Cindy's glares had finally escalated into under-the-table

kicks to remind Tina that Jordan and Darren had dated not so long ago, Tina had quickly clammed up, but the damage had already been done.

Not that Jordan blamed her. When Jordan and Darren had dated, there had been very little in the way of the public handholding, kissing or town function attendance that characterized his relationship with Allison. It was no surprise to Jordan that even her own friends seemed to have forgotten about their relationship. Darren certainly had.

She knew it was her fault, considering that she was the one who had chosen to scrub all of his positive memories and feelings for, but Hermes' magic couldn't explain the stark differences between their former relationship and the one Darren shared with Allison. With not one but three rejections under her belt, Jordan couldn't help but assume that her belt size had something to do with it. It had taken so long for her to be convinced that Darren liked her curves, or at least didn't mind them. Seeing how openly affectionate he was with Allison left Jordan to wonder if he had been embarrassed to be seen with a woman who wasn't lean and sculpted.

Or maybe it was her lack of sophistication. Allison had multiple degrees and had taken a break from a glamorous career in the city just to be with Darren. Surely she was capable of fulfilling intellectual needs that a homeschooled preacher's daughter who had spent the better part of her formative years in an attic just couldn't meet. She still wasn't sure how much of her past Hermes had left behind in Darren's memory, but surely he was relieved to be free of his bumpkin ex.

Jordan hated herself all the more for wallowing. It had taken years to scrape together what little self-esteem her upbringing had left her and she'd worked too hard to become her own woman to let one man tear all that down. Even if he was the first man she'd ever truly loved…

Chase's dark Mercedes peeled into the lot, momentarily distracting Jordan from her self-loathing. He leaped out of the car, looking more frazzled than she had ever seen him. Jordan stood from the swing and waited for him to notice her there.

"I'm so sorry," he began, out of breath. Had he been running? "I ran into Mercy on the way here. She was struggling with her packages so I helped her into the post office and you know how she can talk. I got away as soon as I could."

Jordan did know. *Everyone* in town knew how Mercy was. Jordan was fairly certain Mrs. Herrin only put up with the talkative woman because she

was as quick to part with gossip as she was to come by it.

"It's fine," she assured him. "I was just enjoying the weather."

"It is lovely out for this time of year," he agreed, looking up at the pale orange sunset. He offered a hand to help her off the porch and she took it.

"Thanks."

"If you're willing to give me another chance, I made reservations at Raymond's," he said, referring to one of the only upscale restaurants in town. Technically, it was just on the outskirts of town nestled in the forest, but Cold Creek's residents claimed it as their own.

"No second chance needed," she assured him as he got the door and helped her into his car. The fact that he had gotten derailed by Mercy rather than being rude and walking away from the older woman like most people in town did was admittedly a point in his favor.

Chase settled into the car and took off down the road. "You're very forgiving."

"I could say the same about you."

He gave her a confused look. "How so?"

Jordan tugged at the hem of her skirt. She'd gone shopping and it was one of the few items she'd kept from Hermes' makeover. There was a middle ground between conservative sweater sets and the bondage gear he would have had her in if his tastes were any indication. She felt more comfortable in the fitted leather jacket and blouse anyway, but she couldn't help but wonder if she'd be underdressed for the restaurant.

"So far, every time we've met I've been in some form of emotional distress," she admitted. It occurred to her only then that each of those times had involved Darren in one way or another. "I probably seem like a real flake."

"Not in the least. Darren has that effect on people," he mused, wincing. "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't badmouth your ex. It's in poor taste."

The truth was, Jordan wouldn't have minded if he was interested in badmouthing Allison a little, but she knew she was just being vindictive. "Why do you guys hate each other so much, anyway?"

Chase glanced over at her. "You might say we were old rivals."

"What, you both went for quarterback?" she teased.

He laughed. "No, nothing like that. We just dated the same girl."

"Oh," Jordan said, not quite expecting him to come out and admit that. Her heart sank as she realized there was one prospect in particular that

troubled her. “Allison?”

“No,” he scoffed. “God, no. Allison and I were friends in high school, but the woman’s as vapid as they come. I only spent time with her because my parents wanted the connection to hers.”

Jordan tried to hide her petty delight at that revelation. “Oh. Well, whoever it was must have been special for you to both still hold a grudge over her.”

Chase’s silence filled Jordan with regret as she realized there was one other person he could be talking about. “Oh. Shit. It was Jessica?”

“They’d broken up long before she and I started dating, but Darren never quite got over her,” he said somberly, keeping his eyes on the road. “Under the circumstances, I suppose I can understand him hating the man he’s convinced murdered his high school sweetheart.”

Jordan took a second to chew on her reply. That was a lot to swallow, but at least she wasn’t the only one with baggage. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have asked if I had any idea.”

Chase pulled the car to a stop on the side of the road and the secluded area gave Jordan pause for the first time. She turned to face him, trying to read the pensive look on his handsome features. Once again, her instincts proved seriously broken because her first one was the urge to comfort him. It was obviously a topic that brought him considerable distress, but that didn’t mean he was innocent. If Cold Creek was as “special” as Hermes said it was, who knew what dark secrets its residents were holding?

“Chase, what’s wrong?” she asked warily, refusing to give in to the same hysteria everyone else had caved to without so much as a shred of evidence.

“I thought I could do this without feeling guilty, but I like you too much,” he muttered.

Jordan blinked. For a guy whose quality of life depended on *not* sounding like a serial killer, he had some work to do. “Okay…”

“If we’re seen together, people are going to talk,” he said, finally turning to face her. The look of doubt in his eyes as he white knuckled the wheel erased the trepidations that weren’t half of what they probably should have been. “I know that you’ve dealt with your share of scrutiny since coming here, but you have no idea what people in this town can be like. It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“Hey,” Jordan said, touching his arm. The contact seemed to surprise him, but not as much as the unmistakable hum of energy through his skin startled Jordan. If it hadn’t been for all of Hermes’ training and the physical intimacy that stirred similar sensations, she might not have recognized it. Chase’s energy had a different flavor. Where Hermes’ was a deep freeze, cooling and refreshing everything it touched, Chase’s was warm and bright like the light of the sun. It soaked into her, melting away the pain that seemed so close to consuming her most days.

For a moment, she lingered in awe of it. She wondered if he knew, but the confusion on her face told her he didn’t understand. If he felt the intense familiarity between them, he lacked the magical understanding to place it in its proper context. A look up at the sky reminded her that it was, in fact, the full moon. That explained why she hadn’t felt the same sensation before.

Chase was one of her lovers, just like Hermes thought. And he didn’t seem to have a damn clue.

"Is something wrong?" he asked worriedly.

“No,” Jordan said, collecting herself. This was their first date and she wasn’t prepared emotionally or practically to educate him on what the connection between them truly meant. She wasn’t even sure *she* knew. “It’s nothing. And I don’t care what people think. Besides, it’s just one date.”

He smiled and the relief that touched his eyes left no doubt in her mind that he wasn’t the monster everyone thought he was. Not by a long shot.

If anything, he was the one in danger and Jordan knew she’d need the rest of the night to figure out how to keep him safe.

“If you’re sure,” he said, finally starting back onto the road. They pulled into the crowded parking lot of the small Italian restaurant just outside of town. The trees in the woods surrounding the restaurant were all lit up, but they were no competition for the freshly hung moon in the sky.

Jordan took Chase’s hand as he helped her out of the car. She cast what she hoped was a subtle glance around the lot and breathed a sigh of relief once she saw that Darren's truck was nowhere to be found. The last thing the night needed was another complication.

# THIRTY

"TABLE FOR TWO UNDER WILDE," Chase said to the *maître d'*.

"Right this way," said the man, grabbing two menus from the podium. He led them back to what appeared to be the only two empty tables in the restaurant. They were seated by the window and Chase pulled Jordan's chair out before taking his own.

A moment later, the waiter appeared. "Can I start you out with something to drink?"

"A club soda for me, something red from the top shelf and whatever else the lady wants," said Chase.

"Of course, sir," the waiter said, looking to Jordan. "For you, miss?"

“Something with vodka in it. Thanks,” she said, still reeling from the realization that Chase was one of her destined lovers. Or “consorts,” as Hermes put it. Jordan had always assumed that was a term reserved for the demonic, but there was nothing of the sort in Chase.

Of course, she knew he was a possible candidate. For one reason or another, they’d all been drawn to Cold Creek, but Hermes’ ignorance about the who, how and what left her with more questions than answers. Namely, just what she was supposed to do with Chase now that she’d “found” him.

The waiter left and Jordan turned her attention to the menu. It was genuine Italian cuisine, to her surprise. "I'll have to take you back to New York sometime. There are lots of vegetarian restaurants. I'm afraid this is the best Cold Creek has to offer."

Jordan blinked. “How did you know?”

“I’m sure you must’ve told me.”

“Oh. Yeah,” she said with a stiff laugh. She couldn’t remember it, but the last few months had been nothing if not chaotic. “Well, that’s sweet of you to remember.”

"Of course," he said, taking a sip of the club soda the bus boy had just brought over. "I like the fact that you're an animal lover. I tried being vegan once, but I'm afraid I'm just another bloodthirsty carnivore. I hope that's not too off putting."

"Not at all. Most people give me a hard time about it.”

“Most people have a hard time minding their own business,” he mused.

Jordan smirked. “Spoken like a defense attorney.”

“You can take the public servant out of court…,” he sighed.

The waiter came over with their drinks as the host settled some newly arrived guests at the table behind them. Jordan nearly choked on the sip she’d just taken when she heard a familiar voice behind them ask. "Can we move to a different table?"

Jordan's back stiffened. "Darren?"

Chase looked up sharply, but the edge in his gaze was even sharper. Something about his reaction to Darren’s appearance made Jordan wonder if it was entirely unexpected. She decided that was paranoia talking and turned slowly to face the vet and his date.

Of course, Allison looked stunning with her long black hair and tight yellow dress. Jordan had never been more relieved than when the woman's eyes locked right on Chase.

“Chasey?” she cried.

"Allie," he called back with enthusiasm Jordan immediately recognized as false. He stood to greet her and the two embraced like old friends. “It’s so good to see you. I’ve been meaning to touch base ever since I heard you were back in town."

"Well, you've been busy from what I hear, Mr. High Profile Attorney," said Allison, giving his arm a playful if somewhat flirtatious swat. Darren looked more agitated to be in Jordan's presence than he was jealous of his girlfriend’s current preoccupation.

If there had been any doubt in Jordan’s mind that she was the reason he'd asked to move tables before, there was none now. He hadn’t so much as looked her way even though they were standing right next to each other as Allison chatted up his worst enemy.

"It was nothing," Chase said with the false modesty that seemed to come so easily to him.

"A full profile in the Weekly is *so* not nothing," said Allison.

"Yeah, that's a huge deal," said Jordan. "Even I've heard of it."

Allison glanced over, as if noticing Jordan for the first time. "You must be Jordan," she said with a blindingly white smile, extending her hand. "Darren talks about you all the time. You're that little witch girl, right?"

Jordan returned the handshake, mortified. "That's me. It's nice to meet you."

"Jordan runs a botanicals shop online," Chase said diplomatically, placing a hand on the small of her back. "You know how folks in this town like to exaggerate."

"Hey, what do you say we push our tables together?" Allison suggested. Darren's look of dread echoed Jordan's feelings. "I mean, when was the last time the three of us were in the same room, Mrs. Coleman's health class?"

"Around then, I'm sure," Chase said with a vacant smile. He was a mannequin again. Maybe Allison was the real witch.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," said Darren. "They're obviously on a date and we have things to discuss."

"Oh, the wedding plans can wait," Allison said dismissively.

"Engagement?" Chase looked between them. "When did this happen?"

Allison proudly held her hand forward, wriggling her fingers so the large diamond set between twin sapphires caught the mood lighting overhead. Jordan had no idea how she'd missed it. Willful ignorance, perhaps. Or maybe she'd simply been blinded by the rock.

"Since last week," she said with an excited little giggle. "It's funny, what started out as a fight turned into Darren telling me how much he'd missed me all these years and how he couldn't imagine going through the pain of losing me again. It was so romantic," she said, pressing a hand against her full breasts with a heavy sigh. "We went to the jewelry store just yesterday."

Allison's words settled on Jordan's chest like a pile of rocks. She was relieved that her presence seemed to have been forgotten again, because the weight was making it impossible to breathe, never mind speak.

"Congratulations," said Chase, his enthusiasm waning as he gave Jordan a concerned glance.

"Yeah," Jordan said in a voice that wasn't nearly as feeble as she had feared. "That's great news. Congratulations, both of you."

"Thank you," Allison said gleefully. "So, what do you say about making this a double date, Chasey? It can be your engagement present to me."

Chase hesitated, glancing down at Jordan. "It's really up to Jordan."

Suddenly all eyes were on Jordan. For the first time, Darren was making eye contact with her but it was a mixture of a plea for her to say no and a menacing glare that warned of what was coming if she didn't.

"Sure," she said stiffly. After all, there was no way Darren could think less of her than he already did. She didn't need to earn a new enemy in Allison or risk looking petty in front of Chase. If the thought of sitting across from her was so unbearable, Darren could stand up to his own girlfriend and tell her no for himself.

His *fiancée*, she reminded herself.

"Great!" said Allison, directing Darren and Chase on which way to arrange the tables. She liked sitting by the window. Jordan was to sit across from her and, of course, the "boys" would be on the outside. Jordan was beginning to realize that Allison's air of demure sophistication was just for show. She had never imagined there existed a person willful enough to boss Darren around, but he went along with it without a word.

"So," said Allison, fixing her attention on Jordan. "You must be a smart girl if you snagged Cold Creek's second most eligible bachelor right out of the gate."

Jordan wasn't sure how to respond to that. Fortunately, Chase came to her rescue. "Actually, I'm the one who snagged her. Or at least, I might have a chance now that Darren is off the market."

"Oh, that's right," Allison said stiffly. "I forgot you two dated.

Darren cleared his throat. "Briefly. Very briefly. I mentioned that."

"Yeah, I must have forgotten since you hardly ever talk about it." Allison’s words were said with a smile, but Jordan could tell they were meant to sting.

"It lasted all of two seconds," said Jordan, deciding to help him out in a gesture of goodwill. “I think we went out on what, two official dates?"

Darren looked up with a vague nod of gratitude. "Yeah, about that."

Jordan took a long sip of water to ease the ache in the pit of her belly.

"Oh," said Allison. She seemed mollified, but the warmth she had shown toward Jordan a moment ago was gone. "Anyway, we've just started planning the wedding but we were thinking about getting married at the country club outside of Northampton,” she said, as if she was merely

continuing a conversation they had already been having on the subject. "Your family still has a membership there, right, Chase?”

"My uncle owns it, actually."

Allison squealed and clutched Darren’s arm. "*See*, honey, I told you we should ask him. He's always connected to someone somehow," she said, touching Chase’s hand. Her gaze flickered to Jordan, as if assessing her reaction.

Jordan took another sip of water. She didn’t trust herself to get drunk. No telling what she’d end up saying. As far as she was concerned, Allison could have a threesome with Chase *and* Darren right there on the table as long as she didn't have to stick around. The discussion continued, although it felt more like a lecture on wedding planning from Allison punctuated by some noncommittal grunting from Darren and a few ill-fated attempts from Chase to steer the conversation in a different direction.

Even though it didn't work, Jordan was grateful to him for trying.

"So," Allison said, turning to Jordan after a rather lengthy discussion about the many advantages of incandescent lighting for indoor photographs, "I don't think you ever mentioned why you came here in the first place. Do you have family in Cold Creek?"

"No," said Jordan, starting on her fourth glass of water. She had barely touched her food and wasn't entirely sure if what she had ordered in her distracted state was even vegetarian. She found herself wishing that she’d gotten Hermes to teach her a spell that would give someone laryngitis for an hour. Allison stared at her, clearly expecting a longer answer.

"Well, you obviously didn't come for the booming job market," Allison said, casting Darren a wary glance as if in fear that *he* might have been the reason for Jordan's sudden appearance.

"I certainly did not," Jordan agreed. She thought of letting the woman squirm but decided it wasn't Allison's fault that she was in double date hell, even if she was the vehicle by which Jordan had arrived there. "There wasn't really any particular reason, to be honest. As I'm sure Darren has told you, I was kind of run out of my last town by an angry mob and I needed a place to go. I felt drawn to Cold Creek for reasons I've yet to understand myself and so I came here. Simple as that."

Allison frowned. "That's kind of weird."

"Jordan is a bit of a free spirit," said Chase, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear in admiration. "I find it very refreshing."

Jordan gave him an appreciative smile. She was sure the intimate gesture was just an effort to help her save face in front of the couple, but it was still sweet. Chase was full of little surprises and thoughtful gestures.

"Opposites attract, I guess," Allison said with a resigned sigh. She seemed a bit less on edge than she had been earlier that night. Jordan decided it was probably only because Allison had realized that she was too crazy to pose any threat to her relationship--as if Darren's icy treatment all throughout the evening hadn't been enough to reassure her of that.

Jordan's phone buzzed and she nearly spilled her drink. She still wasn't used to having a phone on her, never mind one that did anything other than ring, but she had finally caved to Hermes' pressure to upgrade to a smartphone. Since she had broken up with Darren, there were only a few people who called her regularly and the number on the display didn't belong to any of them. At least it wasn't from a restricted number.

"Do you need to take that?" asked Chase.

"I probably should, just in case something happened to Mrs. Herrin," Jordan said. "I'll be back."

"Take your time," Allison called. Before Jordan was out of earshot, the conversation turned back to wedding planning.

Jordan found a waiter who showed her the way out onto the veranda, but just before she could open the phone, the ringing stopped. She sighed and swept her bangs away from her forehead. Out in the cool night air, she was aware of how flushed her face was. She opened the phone and returned the missed call, leaning on the balcony that overlooked a small pond rippling gently as it reflected the light of the moon.

The door slid open behind her and Jordan jolted when she heard ringing both on the other line and on the veranda. As she spun around, her balance faltered and she stumbled into Darren. He caught her with one arm while holding his phone with his other hand. He hung up and slipped it back into the pocket of his crisp black blazer.

"Why do you even try to wear shoes you know you can't walk in?" he muttered before righting her on her feet.

"Changing your number is a bit excessive, don't you think?" she asked, closing her phone. "Why did you call me?"

"I didn't change it because of you," he snapped. "Now that I'm on the council, everyone wants a favor. I had to change it, and I called you because we need to talk and I knew it was the only way I could get you alone."

"That's funny, we've been sitting across from each other all night and I don't think you've uttered more than two words to me," she said, folding her arms. "Why the double-oh-seven act?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "That's a marginally up-to-date pop culture reference. I'm impressed."

"I've been working my way through the decades," Jordan grumbled. It seemed that Hermes hadn't erased everything she'd told Darren about her past. "I'm up to the 80s."

Darren snorted, slipping his hands into his pockets. "You might want to stop there."

"You didn't call me out here to talk about old spy movies," she said pointedly. She wasn't about to engage in small talk with him after the way he'd been acting. Avoiding her she understood, but she couldn't think of anything she had done to deserve such ire--at least, not anything he would remember.

"You're right," he said, glancing out at the creek. "I called you out here to ask you a question. Namely, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I *was* preparing to enjoy a nice manicotti and an evening with a man who's capable of being in the same room with me without popping a blood vessel before I got sucked into your wedding plans," she shot back.

"You know what I mean. Chase Wilde? Really, Jordan?"

"What's wrong with Chase?" she challenged. "Besides the fact that he's a magnet for unfounded gossip and slander. He's a nice guy, he's good looking and he doesn't treat me like a leper every time he sees me on the street."

"That's a bit dramatic."

"Make that a leper who kicks puppies and leaves the empty carton of milk in the refrigerator."

Darren looked away as if to hide his amusement. "I just think you could do better than Chase, that's all. I know there aren't that many single men in town, but there are at least a few who don't have a reputation."

"A reputation *you* helped spread," she said dryly. If he wasn't playing nice, neither was she. "You pretend like you're better than the town gossips, but you've kept those rumors alive just the same as everyone else. Besides, people change. If you weren't so busy being jealous of him, you might realize that Chase isn't the person you think he is."

"No? And you know this after all of what, two dates?"

“That’s as many as we went on, apparently,” she shot back. The energy that flowed so freely ever since she’d signed her soul away was ready to boil. "And you're not one to talk. Allison has been back in town for five minutes and you've already proposed."

He cringed. "It wasn't planned, it just happened. At least I have a history with Allison--and Chase, for that matter.”

"I know about your history. You could have told me you both dated Jessica.”

Darren’s face went blank. “I knew you wouldn’t take me seriously when I told you to stay away from him. You don’t know him the way I do.”

“I know more about the person he is now than you do," Jordan said firmly. She wasn’t sure if her need to rush to Chase’s defense was because he was her consort or because she refused to let Darren’ “win” anything. “I know that he's kind, that he goes out of his way to help people even when he gets absolutely nothing out of it in return, and I know that he treats me with respect."

"I'm sure Jessica thought the same thing, and look how well it worked out for her. You're dating a murderer, for Christ's sake."

Jordan's nails dug into her palms. She couldn't be sure of whether the rage building in the pit of her stomach was on Chase’s behalf or her own, but the water in the creek splashed with enough force to spray them both with a fine mist, providing a much-needed distraction.

Darren frowned, peering over the railing. "What the hell?"

"*Alleged* murderer," Jordan snapped. "Being suspected of a crime isn't the same as being guilty of it, and if they’d had the evidence to charge him, they would have. We have a justice system to protect people like him from angry mobs led by bitter men like you. If we lived in different times, you'd be trying to have me burned at the stake. Now you'll settle for running me out of town and making sure that Chase is punished every day for a crime a judge and jury already decided he didn't commit."

"'Alleged murderer,' Jordan?" Darren took a step forward. "Listen to yourself, he's even got you talking legalese."

"I'm sorry, should I use smaller words?" she taunted. "Maybe I'm not a *sophisticated* woman like Allison, but believe it or not, I am capable of forming a thought without the help of a man."

"That's not what I meant."

"Yes, it is. You and everyone else think I'm some helpless brainwashed bumpkin," she muttered, looking away. "I've dealt with far worse monsters than the one you think Chase is and I'm done being afraid. I don't know whether it's jealousy or pity, but I don't need anyone else's protection, especially not yours."

"Jealousy?" he frowned. "I'm not jealous of anything."

"I didn't mean you were jealous of me," she muttered. "Obviously not."

His frown deepened.

"Look," Jordan said, unhappy with the direction the conversation was taking. "We went on a few forgettable dates. We're not friends or even acquaintances. There's no reason we even have to speak to each other. Unless, of course, you're still planning on convincing the council to hold New England's first witch trial in a few hundred years."

"The thought had crossed my mind," he said wryly, watching her for a moment. "I know things ended badly between us, but that doesn't mean I want to see you get hurt. Believe it or not, I still care about you."

Jordan scoffed louder than she intended.

"What?"

She blinked away a few stinging tears. The only thing that could make the night even worse was giving Darren the pleasure of seeing her cry. "I've learned to live with you hating me and even pretending like I don't exist. I'm not sophisticated enough to pretend like it doesn't hurt, or even that it's gotten any easier with time, but I'll survive. What I can't handle is you treating me the way you do and then, when I finally think it's safe to let my guard down, pretending like you give a damn about me. That's crueler than whatever Allison is trying to accomplish by throwing your wedding plans in my face."

"Hate you?" Darren frowned, grabbing her hand so she couldn't turn away. "Is that what you think? That I hate you?"

"Of course you do," Jordan said, shirking away. She stumbled again and this time it was all the way into his arms. Her attempt to shield her watery eyes from him was undone as a tear slipped down her cheek and she found herself staring up at him, their faces barely an inch apart.

Darren held her firmly no matter how she tried to pull away, his fingertips digging into her shoulders. He clenched his jaw as he always did when he was about to let her hear it, but he finally righted her again and took a purposeful step back, letting his hands fall to his sides. "I don't hate

you, Jordan. I can't," he said in a defeated tone. "It's not you. It's not anyone. I've just been...off these past few months. At first I thought it was because of the breakup, and that if I avoided you as much as possible things would finally go back to normal, but they haven’t.”

"What are you saying?" Jordan asked shakily.

He hesitated and finally shook his head as if he'd succeeded in talking himself out of something. "Nothing. All you need to know is that I have been avoiding you, but it's not because I hate you. Not that it's working anyway." He looked off into the woods, running a hand through his hair as he sighed. "I don't know, maybe now that we're both seeing other people we could try to be friends. We've never really done that."

"No, we haven't," Jordan said, watching him warily. Darren was right about one thing, something was going on with him. He hadn't even finished his glass of wine--or touched his food, for that matter--so she knew it wasn't the alcohol. Something was just...off. "I'm not sure Allison would like that, though."

"Allison doesn't get to decide who I'm friends with," he said in a curt tone. "Besides, it's not like you're the only woman in Cold Creek I've dated."

*Of course not,* Jordan thought with more bitterness than she would have liked to admit.

"I guess it's up to you," she said. The idea of having him be so close without being hers seemed almost as painful as not having him in her life at all--almost.

"It's settled, then.” Neither of them seemed to know what to do with the long pause that followed, but Darren was the first to break it. "You still haven't brought that cat in for his shots."

"I found a vet up in Boston,” she said dryly. "I figured there was less of a conflict of interest."

He cracked the first smile she had seen from him in months. "Fair enough."

"What's his name?"

"The vet?"

"No, the cat."

"Oh," she said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Hermes."

"Like the god?” he asked, tilting his head.

“He certainly thinks so.”

Darren chuckled.

The door to the veranda slid open and Jordan's relief at being rescued was short-lived when the sound of high heels clicking across the floor signaled Allison's entrance. "There you are," she said, looking between the two of them in what Jordan could only read as mounting panic. "*Both* of you. How nice."

"I dropped my phone in the pond and Darren came out to help," Jordan said, holding the damp phone up as evidence.

Darren gave her a grateful look before he went to join Allison. "I've got an appointment in the morning, so I'll go pay the bill and we'll get going."

“Chase already took care of it," said Allison. "Before you get mad, he said it was an engagement present."

Darren's nostrils flared in anger. "Dammit, Allison," he muttered before stalking inside, likely to wrestle Chase for the check.

*Men*.

And just like that, Jordan found herself alone with Allison. She could think of any number of venomous, predatory creatures she would have preferred to spend time alone with and the list grew longer as the woman walked toward her. Tarantulas, wasps…she had even seen a rattlesnake at a tent revival once in Mississippi that looked much friendlier than Allison did.

"I know what you're doing," Allison said in a knowing, almost patient tone. "And just so you know, it's not going to work."

Jordan stared blankly at her. "I'm sorry, what?"

"The innocent little girl act?" Allison folded her arms. "Darren might have fallen for that once, but he's with a real woman now. Grown-ups don't have time for all your little hocus pocus slumber party games. Darren thinks you're a joke and the only reason he hasn't pursued fraud charges against you is because he feels sorry for you. Stick with Chase and thank your lucky stars he's willing to put up with you, even though it's probably only because he has a chubby virgin fetish."

The rest of her words rolled off Jordan's back--she had grown up hearing far worse from her own mother on a daily basis--but the last two pierced straight through her heart. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, was that a secret?" Allison asked in a baby voice. "Don't worry, Darren found it more sad than funny."

"You're lying," Jordan said through gritted teeth. "Darren would never have told you I was…"

She couldn't bring herself to finish that sentence. Not because she was particularly ashamed of being a virgin, but because she didn't want to believe that Darren was capable of betraying such an intimate secret to a woman who obviously despised her.

"Oh, but he did," Allison said in a mockingly sympathetic tone. "Not that he needed to. You reek of desperation, sweetie. He's just glad he dodged a bullet. He said you were clingy enough when you were dating and he couldn't imagine what you'd be like if he actually took your virginity. Guess it's a good thing you didn't stick around for the double feature, hm?"

Jordan could no longer see through the tears of rage and hurt in her eyes. So he *had* told her. How else would that night at the theater have come up? All the hope of reconciliation her talk with Darren had inspired in her was dashed in an instant.

Jordan stalked down the stairs and took off running. She knew she was just proving Allison right by acting like a child, but she didn't trust what she would do if she stayed on that veranda one more second. Power was surging from her core out through her fingertips like she hadn't felt since raising Darren from the dead. She didn't know where that power would go if it was allowed to escape or what the consequences would be and she wasn't inclined to stick around the crowded restaurant to find out.

# THIRTY-ONE

JORDAN HAD ONLY INTENDED to run to the parking lot, but her legs kept going without her input. Before she knew it, she was so deep into the forest that she couldn't even hear cars passing on the road anymore. By the time she stopped running, she was far enough away that there was no longer any need to hold back her tears.

Her heart felt like it was going to explode, but it wasn't from the physical exertion. She fell to her knees and if she had been in a different frame of mind, she might have noticed the grass that was singed by her fingertips as they dug into the earth.

So that was all she was to Darren--a joke. She had exposed all of herself to the man, let him see and touch places no one else had, and he had turned that secret and who knew how many others into a joke to be shared with the woman he really loved.

Jordan hoped the two of them had gotten a good laugh, because it would be the last one Darren St. Clair would ever have at her expense.

"Jordan!" A man's voice echoed through the forest and she heard the tree leaves rustling.

The grass beneath Jordan's hands sizzled but her pulse was rushing too loudly in her ears to hear it clearly. As the voice grew closer, she realized it was just Chase. Her anger began to subside, but only slightly.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, rushing to Jordan’s side and running his fingers through the veil of her tousled hair to get a better look at her face. Darren could think whatever he wanted about the man, but if the concern Jordan found in his gaze wasn't real, nothing was. "What happened?"

"I'm fine," she said robotically, wiping her eyes with the back of a grass-stained hand.

"You don't look fine," he said worriedly. "Did something happen with Darren?"

"Don't say his name," she snapped. Even she was surprised by the venom in her tone, but she couldn't quite bring herself to apologize for it. She had run as far from herself as from Allison and she could still feel the energy burning under her skin. Usually it only surged like that when Hermes had her work a spell, but this time, there was nothing to siphon it off. "I don't want to talk about him."

"Alright," Chase said calmly, helping her to her feet. "It's fine if you don't want to tell me what happened, but I should at least get you home."

"Not yet," Jordan murmured, draping her arms around his neck to pull him closer. Her lips hovered a fraction of an inch away from his. Touching him eased the burn and when they were close, she felt a little less in danger of being consumed by the blaze. "There's no reason to head back so soon. It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

Chase hesitated, following her gaze through the trees where the moonlight was gently sifting through the branches like fingers through a lover’s hair. "It is," he agreed, "but you're obviously upset."

"I'll be less upset if you just kiss me," she murmured.

"Jordan --"

She grew tired of waiting for him and stood on her toes to do the job herself. As expected, the intimate contact quelled the flames even further. Jordan found herself drunk on desire once more, but even though it only muted the sting of betrayal, it was a much stronger craving than what she’d experienced in Hermes’ arms. It wasn’t just her that desired Chase anymore. Her energy itself had chosen him, and even if he didn’t yet recognize the bond between them, Jordan knew that solidifying it was the only way she was going to be able to put out the fire. Or keep her sanity.

She felt more than a little guilty about using him as a distraction from her heartache, but the hunger to merge his energy with hers swallowed up all other emotion, guilt and pain included. It was an escape and she needed it so desperately.

Chase’s hesitation faded as soon as their lips met, but when he reached to draw his arms around her waist and pull her closer, she broke off the kiss and took a step back. Crooking her finger with a mischievous smile, she

beckoned him to follow her toward a carefully concealed clearing. The anger that had overtaken her moments ago blended so seamlessly with lust that she had to wonder if the line between them was all that solid.

When Jordan's fingers tugged at the knot in Chase’s tie, he said nothing, but once half the buttons on his shirt were undone he grabbed her hand to stop her. "Jordan, whatever happened between you and Darren --"

She pressed a finger against his lips to silence him. "This has nothing to do with him. This is between you, me and the moon."

His blue eyes showed a war between his nobility and his desire. This time there was no questioning that it was there. Chase Wilde might not have been a killer, thought Jordan, but he was still a man. Her mother had warned her that it was only a matter of time before a man's facade of chivalry gave way to his base nature. The warning had once inspired a deep mistrust of the male of the species in Jordan, but that night she found herself hoping it was true.

Chase’s internal conflict proved to be an opportunity and Jordan seized it, peeling off her shirt to cast it aside in the grass. The self-consciousness that usually plagued her seemed to have vanished with the last traces of hope that things between she and Darren would ever be the same. Maybe it was the energy or the moonlight or simply the fact that it didn't matter what Chase thought of her because no amount of rejection from him could ever come close to the pain of Darren's betrayal.

Chase stared openly and a million different emotions seemed to flicker across the usually placid mask of his face, but not one of them bordered on rejection. Curiosity, anticipation, lust in abundance--perhaps even a bit of guilt—but certainly not rejection.

"Jordan," he began hoarsely, "this probably isn't a good idea."

"Who are you trying to convince?" she asked, reaching for the hook of her bra behind her back. Once the clasp was undone, she took her time slipping it off and let one of the pink straps dangle enticingly from her finger before letting it fall to the ground. She cast a glance over her shoulder to find Chase standing where she'd left him, frozen. "You or me?"

His Adam's apple bobbed.

Jordan sank to her knees and knelt in the soft grass, letting her hands pass over the wispy blades in admiration. "No offense to that hotel room, but I think this is the real honeymoon suite."

The rustle of footsteps was immediately followed by firm hands on her shoulders as Chase dropped to his knees behind her. He swept the hair away from her neck and she moaned as his lips found the crook between her neck and shoulder. He tasted her flesh like a man who hadn't known sustenance in a hundred years and slipped his hand around her to cup her breast. His other arm wrapped across her neck, keeping her pinned to his mostly bare chest as he left a trail of increasingly aggressive marks along her burning skin.

"Chase," she murmured, her tongue struggling to form the right name as she reached behind her to stroke his hair. His hand roved down her side and disappeared only to resurface at the hem of her skirt. It trailed up the inside of her thigh and his fingertips brushed over her panties as if seeking entrance. She shivered at the feather light touch and was caught off guard when his hand slipped inside the confines of the silky fabric. He worked a finger just inside her entrance as he continued nipping lightly at her neck but she let out a small gasp of pain when he tried to push another finger inside of her.

His hand quickly retreated, and when Jordan turned to face him, his gaze was full of worry. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I…” She trailed off, realizing she should probably let him know what he was in for. “I’m *technically* still a virgin.”

His eyes widened. “Oh.”

"Um, yeah," she said, realizing that she wasn't magically immune to self-consciousness after all. "Is that a problem?"

"No, it's just that I didn't expect--" He cut himself off, hesitating. "It's just that your first time should be special."

"I'm kind of tired of hearing that," she admitted. All her life, Jordan had been told that her real power as a woman was between her legs and that as soon as she gave it up, men would be free to use her however they liked. As far as Jordan was concerned, they had already been using her for her entire life. She decided that she would rather be judged for what she had done rather than have her entire identity based on what she hadn't. "I'm tired of waiting for the perfect time."

She was tired of waiting for the perfect person, too, but Chase didn't need to know that. The perfect person was taken and, as she had so painfully figured out, he was kind of a jerk.

Chase seemed to be at war with himself again. The battle came to an end at long last and before she knew it, he had her pinned to the ground and his lips crushed hers with a dizzying amount of force. Jordan decided she liked this new side of the usually reserved lawyer. He was so hesitant, but it seemed that once he'd made his mind up about something, he was as insatiable as she'd become. When he kissed her like that it was impossible to care about much of anything, including Darren. His kiss, his touch seemed capable of making her forget all the things that haunted her, even if it made her forget her better judgment in the process.

Then again, what had her better judgment done for her lately? She had already lost her soul, her family and the man she loved. There wasn't much left for Chase to take, and as far as Jordan was concerned, he could have whatever was left as long as he didn't stop touching her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned her approval as his hand crept between her legs. He slipped her panties off and pushed her thighs open before settling between them. A few minor adjustments and she felt his hardened shaft pressing against her.

"I'll try to be gentle," he murmured, gradually settling his weight on top of her. Jordan nodded, her breath shallow as she felt her energy surge in response. She had tried to push the horror stories she had been indoctrinated with out of her mind, but they all flooded back at once now that the experience she had only ever heard and fantasized about was about to become a reality.

Chase kissed her again and laced his fingers with hers, pressing her hands into the earth. The gentle touch was enough to distract her from her mild apprehension and as he guided himself into her, the slight pain fell far short of her expectations. The pleasure of his body pressed to hers and his tongue exploring her mouth was more than an adequate distraction until the pain faded entirely.

He kept his promise about being gentle even though she could tell that it was taking a great deal of restraint. The deeper he pushed inside of her, the more intense the pleasant warmth became. Jordan's fingertips dug into his back, begging him to come closer. Once he was all the way inside, he stilled for a moment and Jordan felt like he was filling all of her, body and mind. How he seemed unaware of the swirl of energy between them was beyond her. He was in her lungs, her pores, her soul itself. It was the most dizzying, intoxicating bliss she had ever experienced.

"Are you alright?" Chase asked huskily, searching her face for any sign of distress. Jordan thought his eyes looked a bit strange, but it was hard to tell under the moonlight.

Again, she could only nod. There weren’t words for this kind of thing. The perfect melding of their bodies and those ethereal vessels that seemed to exist in another dimension entirely. He kissed her gently and began to rock his hips against her, moving in and out with more force each time. His toned chest and sculpted torso brushed against her soft breasts and stomach each time he thrust into her until the lines between them became blurred.

Jordan gasped as the heat that had been building up inside of her exploded into a fire and she trembled violently underneath him. As she came, she dug her nails into his back and realized too late that she was probably hurting him. Chase chuckled knowingly in her ear, reassuring her that all was as it should be. In fact, he seemed more aroused than ever.

"What lovely sounds you make,” he purred into her neck, groping her velvety flesh as he ground into her with more intent. The change in angle sent another surge of pleasure deep inside of her. ”I think I'd like to hear it again," he said, driving into her in such a way that made her cry out in pleasure.

When Jordan realized that her nails had drawn blood on her lover's back, she groped the earth behind her head in order to spare his flesh. Her own breath was becoming as ragged as her lover's as he moved inside of her. Her shallow breaths turned into panting and her hips arched into him instinctively. So deep was her bliss that she didn't notice the grass beginning to singe a circle around them.

Chase’s mouth had returned to her neck as he fondled her breasts, seeming intent on claiming as much of her body as he could with his. Jordan's hips bucked in time with his in an impossible attempt to bring them even closer together. Maybe it was the point when the pressure on her neck turned to pain or when the pleasure between her legs became too much to bear without crying out a name that almost certainly wasn't Chase, but in a single instant the smoking grass exploded into a circle of flame.

Jordan cried out sharply as a ring of fire engulfed them and Chase collapsed on top of her with a shudder. They stared at each other, unblinking and panting. Once the initial shock wore off, Chase rose off of her and stared at the flames in utter bewilderment.

Jordan got to her knees and stared with him in equal disbelief as she held her neck. Had it been her imagination, or had he bitten her? The thought was fleeting in her mind as the flames climbed higher.

“What the hell…?”

“Yeah…I think that’s my fault,” Jordan said hoarsely. The heat from the fire was already making her dizzy.

Chase blinked and obviously didn’t know what to say to that. He grabbed his jacket off the ground and threw it on the fire. His attempts to smother the flames were met by a roaring blaze that consumed his jacket in a matter of seconds and left the infernal circle unbroken.

The impossibility of what Jordan had just witnessed snapped her out of shock. She fumbled through her discarded clothes and took out her phone, dialing Hermes' number since she was pretty damn sure this wasn’t the kind of flame any human fire department could put out. She made it past the third digit before her phone went dead. “Shit!”

Chase was watching her like most people in town already did. If they did survive, Jordan would be surprised if she didn't end up in a padded room. Nonetheless, he followed suit and took out his phone. "It's dead," he said in disbelief. "I don't understand, I just charged it."

Jordan stared listlessly at the fire. "It's not your phone that’s the problem.”

He was silent for a moment, save for his cough. "This isn't normal fire, is it?"

"No," Jordan murmured, still looking into the flames.

"Can you stop it?"

"I don't know, but I’m going to try,” she said, trying to focus on the mental image of the flame receding. Hermes had taught her to visualize whatever it was she wanted to happen, and it had always worked with healing. Then again, she’d spent her whole life practicing that ability and she had no reason to believe it wouldn’t work. Putting out fires she’d started with her mind was uncharted territory.

"Please do,” Chase said, breaking into a coughing fit that lasted longer than the others had.

Jordan closed her eyes and focused intently. "Hermes," she whispered. When no response came, she tried a little louder, "Hermes, please! If you can hear me, I need you."

Chase was staring at her again. “Are you calling for your cat?”

“It’s…hard to explain,” Jordan coughed. The ring of fire flickered and climbed higher than ever before, as if reaching for the moon, before it shrank down. Jordan wasn't sure if it was just her imagination, but she thought it was a bit lower than it had been before.

"It's working," Chase wheezed. "Whatever you did is working."

Jordan's pulse thundered in her ears. All she’d done was get pissed at her familiar for going MIA when she actually needed him. Maybe fantasizing about strangling cocky demons was the key to controlling her newfound pyrokinesis?

Doubtful but worth a shot, she decided. It wasn’t like they had any better options available and Jordan was not eager to help fate with its obvious goal of killing her with fire.

Maybe anger itself was the key. She closed her eyes and thought of Darren, since he had always elicited the strongest emotions from her, both positive and negative. The thought of him mocking her in front of Allison was enough to do the trick. Maybe they had even shared a laugh about how he'd made her squirm just by touching her, like the pathetic, pent-up idiot she was...

Her eyes opened and the flames looked larger.

“I don’t know what you just did, but I don’t think it’s working,” Chase choked out.

“No kidding,” Jordan muttered, reaching out toward the flames. Now she knew that they were at least somewhat linked to her emotional state. It just didn’t seem to be in any way that she could influence.

“What are you doing?” Chase asked, remarkably calm for someone surrounded by magic fire.

“I have no idea,” she admitted, squinting into the blaze.

“Why do I get the feeling this has happened before?”

“It has once,” she said in a strained voice. “I couldn’t stop it then, either.”

Chase’s silence made her worry that he’d passed out from the smoke, but she froze when she felt him behind her, his hands resting on her shoulders. “If you made this, then you can stop it. Try drawing it back into yourself.”

For a second, Jordan didn’t know how what to make of his words or the confidence behind them. “I don’t think —“

“Try,” he urged, his grip tightening on her shoulders. Something in his touch grave her strength as much as it had given her pleasure minutes earlier.

Jordan refocused on the blaze and did as he suggested, imagining the screaming tendrils of flame being pulled back through her fingertips. To her amazement, the mental image became reality and the fire began to recede from the earth as it came to rest in her hands. They both glowed with hot orange flame for a few seconds, but while the heat was still unbearable, Jordan’s flesh remained unburnt.

Before the shock could fade, the flame disappeared entirely and Jordan stared down at her smoking palms. “What the *fuck*?”

Chase coughed, waving away the smoke that lingered in the air. “Nice job.”

Jordan stared at him. “How the hell did you know to do that?”

“I didn’t,” he said, his voice still rough from the smoke. “It’s an old meditation technique and I thought it was worth a shot.”

The realization that they were only alive by chance made Jordan even more lightheaded, but Chase’s response was almost more concerning.

"So," he said, gathering Jordan’s clothes for her before he pulled his own back on. "That whole witch thing. It's not just a rumor, is it?"

"No," Jordan said with a strangled laugh. “It’s not.”

“Can’t say I saw that coming,” he remarked, running a hand through his hair as if to make sure it hadn’t caught on fire. Only he would still be concerned about his appearance at a time like that, thought Jordan. “I suppose I owe you an apology.”

“For what?” she asked in disbelief. “I’m the one who almost killed us both.”

“For not taking you seriously.” He gave her a hint of a smile that reminded her of the intimacy they’d just shared. “I knew this town was full of strange happenings, but until tonight, I never saw anything I couldn’t rationalize. At least after a few beers.”

“I know I’m really not one to talk, given the circumstances, but you are a *very* strange man,” she muttered, pulling her shirt back on.

Chase laughed. “So I’ve been told.” He cocked his head. “So Stu Herbert… You really did heal him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Well, sort of. Most of the time, I use tinctures and salves. This is really the first time it’s been so…direct.”

“Huh.”

“‘Huh?’” she echoed. “You almost died and that’s all you have to say? *Huh?*”

“I’m an empiricist, Jordan. I believe in what I can see and touch, and well… There’s no denying that what happened tonight was real.”

Jordan blinked. Maybe it wasn’t going to be such a shock for him to find out he was her consort, after all. She just knew that she needed to figure out what that meant before she finished turning his world upside down. “I’m not sure if I should thank you for being understanding or take you to the hospital to get your head checked, but…thanks.”

"I'm not going to lie, that's the first time I've ever made a girl spontaneously combust--or call out another man's name, for that matter,” he mused.

Jordan cringed. "I didn't--"

"It's okay," he said, holding his hand up to stop her. "I could tell you weren't over Darren as soon as we saw them at the restaurant. Luckily I'm not the possessive type. We can keep this open ended until you figure out what it is you want.”

Jordan stared at him, almost as shocked by his reaction as by whatever had just happened to her in the forest. "You say that like you actually want to see me again."

"Next Friday, if you're free."

She opened her mouth but no words would come for a moment. "I almost set you on fire and you want a second date?"

"Third, technically," he clarified. "And yes, but preferably somewhere a little less flammable."

"But --"

Chase stepped closer and pressed a finger against her lips. "Like I said, I'm a pretty openminded guy. How about I pick you up at eight o'clock?"

Jordan nodded. "Okay… sounds good."

"Perfect," he said, cupping her chin. "Just prepare yourself."

"For what?"

A wicked grin spread across his face. "Next time, I can guarantee it's my name you'll be screaming."

# THIRTY-TWO

JORDAN RETURNED home that night ready to scold Hermes for his utter uselessness as her supposed guardian and mentor, but he was nowhere to be found. It wasn't unusual for him to come in late after prowling around and doing whatever it was that demons did at night, but when evening turned into the wee hours of the morning, she began to worry. When the weekend turned into the middle of the week and he still wasn't back, worry turned to panic.

It was common for Jordan to wake up in the middle of the night to find the white cat sitting on her chest, staring passively at her. Her sleep was interrupted plenty of times over the next few nights when she finally managed to succumb to her exhaustion, but her own personal incubus was nowhere to be found. It wasn't like him to disappear for so long and she couldn't help but worry that her explosion in the forest had something to do with it. Even Mrs. Herrin had noticed his absence.

When the front door opened and Hermes stumbled in days later wearing a pair of designer sunglasses he had more than likely stolen and sipping a frothy drink from a coffee chain that didn't exist anywhere within a hundred miles of Cold Creek, Jordan was torn between throwing her arms around him and throttling him.

First one, then the other, she decided. “Hermes!” she cried, wrapping her arms around his lean torso to squeeze him as tightly as she could.

"Geez, if you want a sip of my mocha, all you have to do is ask," he said, resting a hand on her head.

"Five days," she said through gritted teeth, giving him a shove. "You were gone for five fucking days without so much as a word."

"Good to know you become profane and angry when I'm gone," he said, looking her over. "And apparently you also forget that denim never goes with denim."

Jordan looked down at her denim vest and tight black jeans, frowning. "You're not getting out of this one with sassy one-liners. Where *were* you?"

He sighed heavily and flopped into a chair at the kitchen table, slipping off his sunglasses to reveal his bloodshot eyes. He grimaced at the light and rubbed his temples. "Fine, I'll tell you, just stop yelling. Your accent comes out when you're pissed off and I feel like I'm being yelled at by a lesbian cowgirl."

Jordan shrugged out of the vest that was so obviously distracting him. Tina had insisted that retail therapy would cheer her up, but it was obvious that her fashion advice was not to be trusted. She dropped the vest and the moment it left her hand, it burst into flames before turning into a pile of ash.

Hermes leaned heavily on the table, a hand buried in his tousled white hair. "Looks like the Lake of Fire is good for something, after all."

"I'm glad you had such a fun time partying," Jordan muttered, rummaging through the cabinets. She found a few herbs and snipped a bud off her lavender plant, taking more pleasure than she wanted to admit in pretending it was a lock of his beloved hair. "I see even *you* aren't immune to hangovers."

"You know, if you're gonna act like a wife and make me feel like shit every time I come home trashed after a night of debauchery, I should at least be getting laid."

"Four nights," she reminded him, setting a mug of the freshly brewed elixir in front of him.

Hermes eyed the concoction warily and his nose wrinkled when he sniffed it. "You know the magic potions I've been teaching you to make won't work on me, right?"

"It's not witchcraft, it's a hangover cure I learned from Mrs. Herrin. I want you fully present while I tear you a new one."

"Sounds fun," he said listlessly, taking a sip only to cough and spew it out.

"Dammit, Hermes, just swallow."

His tired eyes lit up with mischief. "Oh, if --"

"If only you had a nickel for every time you heard that, yeah, I know," she said, rolling her eyes as she held the cup to his lips and tilted it back,

knowing that he would eagerly drink if it meant sparing his outfit. "Bottoms up, Beelzebub."

He coughed and sputtered but he choked it down, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "Little do you know, that's *flattery* where I come from."

"I'm sure I'll find out soon enough. How's your head?"

He paused for a moment and sat up straight. "It's probably just a placebo effect, but better. What's in that hogwash, anyway?"

"It's a secret." She finally knew something he didn't and wasn't about to let that change any time soon.

"Well, aren't you smug," he said, tapping his nails on the table. "And here I was hoping all that sanctimony was wrapped up in your virtue."

Jordan stared at him in shock. "How did you --?"

"That's not important," he said with a wave of his hand. Another chair slid across the floor and she fell into it. "The more pertinent questions are the who, where, when and how? I want details."

"What about the why?"

"Sex *is* the why, cupcake."

Jordan sighed, struggling to remember his list of inquiries. “Chase, in the forest last Friday during our date, and I'm not really sure how to answer the last one."

"Ah, so the hunky lawyer finally let you into his briefs."

She frowned. "Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Give me a break, I'm still not at a hundred percent. How did you end up in the forest? I hope you checked yourselves for ticks after."

"The only bloodsucking parasite I have to worry about is you. I don't know how it happened," she admitted. "It certainly wasn't planned. We were just out for dinner when Darren and his fiancée showed up, and --"

"Whoa, roll that back," Hermes said, leaning forward. "Since when does the vet have a fiancée?"

"Since he asked her to marry him last week."

"I thought this was the same high school sweetheart who broke his heart and boned another guy before they could even set a date for the wedding."

"That's her," said Jordan, pouring herself a cup of tea.

Hermes' pale brows lifted. "And how do we feel about that?"

"*I* feel fine," she said pointedly, taking another sip. "I could have used a shoulder to cry on a few days ago, but I'm over it. Mostly."

He gave her a dubious look. "Well, I'm sorry. If I'd known it would be such a big weekend for my little baby, I would have stayed home."

"It's not the handholding I'm upset about, it's the fact that I almost died and you were nowhere to be found."

"Hang on, how did it progress from awkward dinner with your ex and his new-old flame to deadly forest sex?" He frowned and his eyes took on a dangerous glint. "Did something happen to set you off? Do I need to pop the bronzed head off of Lawyer Ken's neck?"

"No," she said quickly. “Chase didn't do anything, he was... well, he was wonderful. And I’m pretty damn sure he’s also my consort.”

Hermes’ eyes widened. “So I was right. One for two’s not bad, I suppose. I was starting to lose faith in my own infallibility.”

“You could have warned me there was a chance of hellfire if we had sex.”

“So he’s the one who holds the key to pyrokinesis,” Hermes mused, clearly untroubled by her near death experience. “Never would’ve figured that, but these things have a way of surprising you.”

“So you did know,” she hissed.

“Don’t get your granny panties in a bunch. Where do you think the fire in Arkansas came from?”

Jordan’s eyes narrowed. “It was different this time. It was terrifying, but it was slightly more controlled.”

“So are you,” he answered.

“Why now?” she muttered. “Why did it take this long to resurface again?”

“There are things you don’t remember because you were so young,” he said carefully. “Things I’ve been keeping from you until the time was right.”

“What are you saying?” she demanded. “Whatever it is, I have a right to know.” She didn’t like the implication that Hermes knew anything about her past that she didn’t. Had he been watching her? If so, that raised all sorts of troubling questions. Namely why he hadn’t intervened sooner.

“You’re the human equivalent of a nuclear bomb, Jordan. Your power was out of control. It had to be repressed.” Before she could ask the question on her mind, he added, “Before you interrupt me, I don’t know because I was *there*. I see things you don’t and when we contracted, I saw inside your mind.”

“You what?” she cried.

“Simmer, Sabrina. It’s all in the fine print, and it’s not my fault you didn’t read.”

“You were pressuring me and Darren was dead,” she said through clenched teeth.

He waved his hand. “Splitting hairs. Do you want answers or not?”

Jordan tightened her jaw and sank back in her chair, forcing herself to let him speak.

“I know memories that have been manipulated when I see them, and your mind is a mess. After the fire, someone repressed your powers.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“Possibly so you couldn’t do any more damage until you were old enough to control them.

“Or…?”

“Or to keep you off Heaven’s radar until he was able to control you himself.”

“You think it was him, don’t you? Lucifer…” Her throat tightened as she said the name.

“Only an archangel is powerful enough to suppress that kind of power.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?”

“You weren’t ready.”

“Says who?”

“Says me,” he replied, folding his arms. “Until I came along, you were a closet case with zero self-awareness. Excuse me for wanting to ease you into this. It’s not like it’s the end of the world if we fail or anything. Oh, wait…”

“Don’t,” Jordan snapped. “You don’t get to bail on me when I need you and start lecturing me about responsibility. I’m trying to bring my family back. All you care about is making sure your favorite vacation destination doesn’t get destroyed.”

“Your complaints have been duly noted,” he said in a condescending tone. “I’ll keep a closer eye on you in the future. Truth be told, I didn't think your power would progress this quickly."

“Well, it did. In front of Chase, no less,” she muttered.

“How did he take it?”

“Unnervingly well. I still haven’t told him he’s my consort.”

“Probably for the best. Now that the seal of flame has been broken, you have some time to ease him into things.”

"Seal?”

“When Lucifer suppressed your power, he did it with five seals. The Whore’s energy is composed of all five elements: Fire, water, earth, air and spirit. It’s too much to contain with one seal, so each one has to be broken to unlock a different aspect. Chase was the first.”

“Are you saying *Lucifer* chose my consorts?”

“No. Let me think of a way to put this in terms a human will understand,” he said, pressing his fingers together thoughtfully. “A seal is just a type of magic. You want to bind energy, you have to do it by summoning stronger energy from somewhere else. The universe always finds a balance. It’s already public knowledge in Heaven and Hell that the Whore will have five consorts, so the energy he summoned naturally came from them. When the time is right, your connection to each of them will break that consort’s respective seal. Following me so far?”

“More than I want to,” she sighed.

“Relax. The seals are just *containing* your power. It’s always been there, now it’s simply available to you. And you didn’t do a half-bad job handling yourself, from the sound of things.”

“Chase helped,” she admitted. “I kind of panicked.”

“He’s your consort. He was bound to you before you were born, so helping you control your power comes naturally.”

“Are you saying he exists for me?” Jordan asked, uncomfortable with the thought for a myriad of reasons.

“I’m saying he’s the personification of the seal and vice versa. His energy and yours are intertwined, so you don’t need to angst about him rejecting you,” he sneered. “And for the record, I don’t need to read your mind to know that. You wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“Have I ever told you what a comfort you are?” she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Comfort?” Hermes laughed. “I can protect you and guide you through unlocking your power, but if it’s comfort you’re after, you’d be better off finding a guardian angel.”

Now that was a joke, thought Jordan. The only angel who had ever taken an interest in her was more interested in using her than protecting her.

“I should tell him soon,” she murmured. “He needs to know what he’s getting into.”

“When are you seeing him again?”

“Friday night.”

“I wouldn’t sweat the revelation just yet. There are four seals to unlock before we get down to the fun stuff, and you, my darling, are still in way over your head.”

“You want me *not* to tell him I’m destined to fuck four other men?”

“Did you say you were exclusive?”

“Well, no, but…”

“So just relax and enjoy the casual stage. It’s the only part of a relationship some people stick around for, and for good reason,” he said wryly, draping his arm over the back of his chair. “Besides, you should let the fire settle in before you start trying to crack open another seal.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Sex helps,” he shrugged. “If it hadn’t been for us fooling around, you probably would’ve set the whole forest ablaze.”

Jordan’s heart sank. “Is that why? Screwing me is just about maintenance?”

“Don’t be dramatic. You’re not a normal witch, you’re the Whore of Babylon, and I’m your familiar. Sex is obviously going to factor into the equation.”

His words stung, but not nearly as much as the ones Jordan’s mind was coming up with. How could she have been stupid enough to think Hermes was interested in anything other than her power, even for a moment? More importantly, why did it matter?

She hated him. The sooner she remembered that, the better.

“I’m going out,” she muttered, grabbing her jacket.

“Where?”

Jordan shot him a filthy look. “You disappeared for four days without saying a word. I don’t have to start giving an account of myself to you.”

“I’m your familiar.”

“Exactly,” she said, slamming the door behind her. The title obviously didn’t mean to him what it had once meant to her. At least now they were both on the same page.

# THIRTY-THREE

NORMALLY, Cindy and Tina's constant bickering gave Jordan such a headache that she tried to avoid going out with them both at the same time, but it was a welcome distraction that warm spring afternoon. Tina insisted the movie they had just seen must have been filmed in New Zealand while Cindy was adamant that those were none other than the rolling hills of northwestern Connecticut in the cutaway scenes.

"Jordan, you're well-traveled. Will you please settle this matter and tell my ridiculous sister how wrong she is?" Cindy asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

Jordan looked up absently as they passed through the town square. The sign on the animal clinic's door had been flipped to *Closed*, which probably meant Darren was running around town with Allison, whose wedding plans seemed to have taken over the entire town. "Hm?"

Cindy and Tina exchanged a knowing glance.

"I told you she wasn't over him," Cindy muttered.

"Oh, please," Tina scoffed. “Chase has that scruffy curmudgeon beat three ways to Sunday. What's there to get over when her new boyfriend has a sports car, a five-bedroom home *and* a career in New York?"

"I wasn't looking for Darren," Jordan said once she realized that was what they were going on about. To be fair, she had cast more than a few glances at the familiar blue building since they’d sat down, but in this particular instance, Darren wasn't the cause for her curiosity.

There had been a woman standing on the sidewalk in front of the clinic, pacing back and forth for the past ten minutes. She was statuesque and elegant, dressed in a light yellow frock that looked more like it belonged in

a Jackie O museum than in the window of any of the clothing shops in town. Every now and then, her wide-brimmed hat would turn up toward the apartment like she was waiting for someone to appear in the window. Her reddish-brown hair was coiffed into a neat bob that hung just above her shoulders and seemed unaffected by the summer breeze that had long since made Jordan give up on managing her own wavy tresses.

"Of course you weren't, dear," Cindy said without even trying to conceal her pity.

"No, really," said Jordan, nodding across the street. "See that woman? She's been standing there watching the building since we were at the cafe."

Tina shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted towards the clinic. "What woman? Nellie Fitzroy?"

"No, not her," Jordan said, pointing Tina away from the plump groomer who was giving her poodle a handful of bottled water as she sat on a nearby bench. "The other woman, the one in the yellow dress."

Cindy came over to join them and frowned. “I really don't see anyone besides Nellie, dear."

The woman was staring at them now. Even from a distance, Jordan could see the crucifix hanging around her neck. She jolted when the other woman made eye contact.

When Jordan finally looked away, she realized both Cindy and Tina were giving her some worried looks of their own.

"Maybe we've been out in the sun for too long," said Tina. "Heat stroke happens quickly, you know."

"Come on, dear, we'll go grab a bottle of water at Kipman's," Cindy said in a motherly tone, placing an arm around Jordan's shoulder. Jordan glanced back toward the clinic as her friends led her towards the grocer's, frowning at the suddenly empty space on the sidewalk the woman in the yellow dress had occupied for so long. She looked all around the square, but the woman was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe Jordan really had been out in the sun for too long.

Tina found a bench in the square and Cindy left to return a moment later with three bottles of water.

"Thanks," said Jordan, taking a sip. She was thirstier than she thought, but the hydration did nothing to shake the crisp memory of the woman outside Darren's building or the strange look on her face. She had seemed

so worried, but surely she would have asked for help if it was an emergency.

"Feeling any better?" asked Tina.

"I'm fine, really."

The librarian pressed a hand to Jordan's forehead. "You're warm."

Jordan sighed. "So are you, Tina. We were sitting outside for an hour."

Tina quickly pressed her hand to her own forehead and gave Cindy a panicked look. "Do you think I've got it, too?"

Cindy rolled her eyes. "When *you* start seeing apparitions, then I'll worry."

"You both fuss over me too much," said Jordan. Not that she was complaining. She didn't know why Tina and Cindy had taken her under their wings, but she was grateful. It was impossible to be sad around them, even if the ache in her heart that had been there ever since the festival never quite disappeared.

Cindy opened her mouth to reply when something caught her eye across the square. "Yoohoo, Dr. St. Clair!" she called pleasantly, turning to roll her eyes at Tina and Jordan. "He must have slipped his leash. This is the first time I've seen him walking around on his own since the engagement."

"Don't call him over," Jordan pleaded.

"He was already on his way, dear. Better to make it look like it was your idea," Cindy advised, giving a friendly wave as Darren drew closer.

Jordan decided she was right and straightened her posture, summoning the courage it would take to look him in the eye when he came close enough. It was the first time she had officially encountered Darren after their unexpected reunion at the restaurant and she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking Allison had gotten to her. She was sure the woman had already regaled him with all the details of her meltdown, but there was little she could do to change that.

When the veterinarian came close enough, Jordan could see his brow furrowed in that worried expression she knew so well. "Jordan, are you alright?" he asked. He didn't address or even seem to notice the others.

"She has heat stroke," Tina said matter-of-factly.

"Don't be so dramatic, Tina," Cindy scolded. "Jordan just got a bit overheated so we're taking a little break." She fanned herself with the takeout menu she had snatched from the nearby diner.

"Are you sure?" asked Darren, stopping in front of the bench where Jordan was sitting. He knelt down in front of her. "You do look a little flushed. Are you feeling weak? Lightheaded?"

When he reached to touch her forehead, Jordan swatted his hand away. "I'm fine," she said tersely, standing. Unfortunately, her clumsiness betrayed her and she nearly staggered into him, but she managed to catch herself. Darren reached out to steady her and her head was spinning too much to stop him. His hand was so cold to the touch that she was beginning to entertain the idea that she really did have heatstroke.

"You don't look fine," he replied.

"I'm not one of your patients," she said, pulling out of his grasp. "If I want a medical assessment, I'll ask a real doctor."

The comment clearly hit its mark when Tina and Cindy fell silent. Jordan regretted it immediately, even if he deserved that and more.

"Ladies, could I have a moment alone with Jordan?" he asked, strangely calm. Jordan could only wonder at the man who was prone to screaming at her when she had done nothing wrong and yet capable of the utmost maturity and composure when she actually deserved his ire.

Tina and Cindy exchanged an awkward glance before turning back to Jordan. Sometimes they seemed more like twins than just sisters.

"Will you be alright?" asked Cindy.

"I'm fine," Jordan said, already regretting her outburst. "I'll call you later."

"Do," they said in unison. Tina glanced back at them and whispered something to her sister as they took off.

Jordan turned back to Darren, struggling to formulate an apology before things could get any worse. Before she had the chance, he took her by the wrist and started dragging her toward his clinic.

She planted her heels on the pavement, forcing him to stop. “Let go of me, asshole.”

Darren stopped to face her. “Normally, I wouldn't take a diagnosis from Tina too seriously, but I don't think she's far off this time," he said, eying her worriedly. "You don't look okay, and you're certainly not acting like yourself."

Jordan sighed. "Look, I'm sorry I said that. It was a cheap shot, but I'm fine. I'm just in a bad mood."

“Yeah, since you saw me. I know you’ve been avoiding me since the restaurant, and I want to know why.”

Jordan glanced over her shoulder and realized Chase’s office was close enough for him to get the wrong idea if he happened to look out the window. “Fine,” she muttered, following him into his clinic. It *was* cooler and to her relief, it was empty. “Five minutes.”

The bell over the door rang as Darren followed her in, his arms folded. “What's going on? I know things have been rough between us since the breakup, but I thought we made progress the other night."

"So did I," Jordan said bitterly. So much for being a cool, confident woman the next time she saw him. Darren had always had a way of stripping away any veneer of composure she put up, and it seemed that the ability had outlasted their intimacy.

“So?” he demanded. “What happened that I don’t know about?”

Jordan frowned, questioning her assumption that Allison had spent the entire car ride home gloating. Maybe her lips were tighter than Darren's. Jordan thought briefly of confronting him about it, but decided that even in the best case scenario, it would just unearth the feelings of humiliation and betrayal for no reason. The worst case scenario was that it would look like she was just trying to start a fight between him and Allison. He already saw her as pathetic and crazy. She didn't see any point in adding jealous and petty to the list.

"Nothing. I just finally came to my senses, that's all."

"Would you mind translating that into English for me?" he asked dryly. "In case you didn't notice while we were dating, I'm not complex enough for emotional code words and cryptic comments."

"We can't be friends, Darren. That's the long and short of it."

"Why not?"

"For plenty of reasons, not the least of all because I'm never going to be able to see you as just a friend," she admitted, deciding that was the answer that would put him in the least danger, even if it was the most embarrassing for her. "No matter how much I want to."

Her words seemed to have stunned him momentarily, so she continued, "Then there's the fact that you're engaged and I can tell I'm not your fiancée's favorite person."

"Why?" He frowned. "Did she say something to you?"

Jordan searched his face for any sign of deceit but found none. *She really didn't tell him.*

"No, but it's obvious and I don't blame her. I was in her shoes not too long ago and I can't say I'd have been crazy about you striking up a friendship with her, either."

"Like I told you last week, Allison doesn't get to decide who my friends are," he said firmly. "Besides, I already explained what happened between us and she was fine with it."

"Oh, I'm sure you did."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Jordan said, walking past him. “Just worry more about your fiancée and less about me.”

"We're not done here, Jordan," he said, stalking after her. It was only when he blocked her path that she noticed how dark the circles under his eyes had gotten. His skin was pale, even for the fluorescent lighting in his office. There was an edge to his tone that hadn't been there before and she wasn't sure she liked it.

"Actually, we are," she said, slipping underneath his arm. At least there were some benefits to being short.

"No, we're not," Darren growled, taking her by the arm. As he spun her around, her mind flashed back to the alleyway when Hank had grabbed her. The shock must have been obvious on her face because, for a moment, his eyes were filled with horror. At least it was something other than apathy or anger. He had seemed capable of little else ever since Hermes had brought him back from the dead.

"I'm sorry," he said, releasing her immediately. "I don't know what came over me."

Jordan looked down at the red marks forming on her forearm and tried to rub them away, as if she could pretend it hadn't happened if she could keep the evidence from forming. Darren stared at her like he wanted to say something else and couldn't find the words.

“It’s…fine. I guess neither of us are feeling like ourselves today,” she muttered.

"Let me see your arm," he pleaded, reaching for her hand.

She jerked it back out of instinct and a mixture of pain and guilt showed on his face for an instant before it was expressionless again. "I didn't mean--"

"I said it's fine, Darren," she said, lowering her voice to keep it steady. "Let's just forget it. Better yet, let's try to forget everything that's happened between us, alright?"

He set his jaw. "Is that really what you want?"

"It is," she lied. It wasn't at all what she wanted, but she knew it was the only way she was going to survive Cold Creek, especially now that the future Mrs. St. Clair was running around. "I know we're going to run into each other at town events, especially since Chase and Allison are friends, but there's no reason we have to go out of our way to talk to each other."

"I guess not," he said stiffly, falling silent for a moment before he asked, “So you and Chase, that's official now?"

“I wouldn’t say it’s *official*. We're not engaged or anything, but yes, we're dating."

"I give that a week," he muttered. "I'll say one thing for the man, he gets what he wants."

"So do you, Darren," Jordan said, trying to keep the melancholy out of her voice. “You and Chase just want very different things."

He frowned and seemed about to argue before he muttered something under his breath and shook his head. "Just promise me something."

"That depends on what it is."

"Friends or not, you come to me if he tries anything," he said with a look in his cold gray eyes that she never thought she would see again--at least, not for her.

"We're in a relationship, Darren. Him 'trying things' kind of comes with the territory."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

“Chase would never hurt me," she said, regretting her choice of words when he cringed. "I appreciate the offer, but protecting me isn't your job anymore and it's not his, either. I'm not the same pathetic girl you broke up with."

He frowned. "Pathetic? Is that how you think I see you?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, trying to drown out the memory of Allison's words. "In any case, I can take care of myself now," she said, pulling the door open. She paused, lingering under the bell for a moment. "Before I go, you should know that someone has been watching your shop."

"Who?"

"A woman. I've never seen her before, so I don't think she's from around here… I just thought you would want to know."

"Yeah, thanks," he said, taking a step closer. “Jordan, I --"

"Goodbye, Darren," she said, letting the door fall shut behind her before he could say anything else. She knew she wasn't going to make it very far before the tears came and she didn't want to give him one more funny anecdote to share with Allison.

# THIRTY-FOUR

*Three Months Later*

"JORDAN?"

Chase’s voice broke through the clutter in her mind. They were seated outside the only French bistro in town at a little cafe table since the weather was nice. Jordan had lost track of the conversation somewhere between the latest scandal at the country club Chase’s uncle owned and his speculation as to what the theme of Cindy's next party might be. Everyone had agreed that her last--a nautical event complete with pirate ship netting and a waitstaff dressed as bar wenches--had been one of her finest yet.

"Mm, yeah, the party was great," said Jordan, taking a spoonful of the French onion soup that had grown cold in front of her. She was watching Darren’s building in the town square below as the woman in the familiar yellow dress paced back and forth underneath a flickering street lamp. Her appearances were growing more frequent, but she seemed to be on no set schedule. Jordan had seen her there both early in the morning before any of the shops had opened and late at night as Chase walked her home. She wasn't always there, but Jordan had only ever spotted her in front of Darren's building and she was always wearing the same yellow dress and large straw hat. Jordan had long since realized that she was the only one who saw the woman and had grown so weary of the pitying glances that she stopped asking if anyone else could.

Whenever she asked Hermes about it, he would merely smile and suggest that she say hello next time.

"The party?" Chase frowned. "You know, a man with a fragile ego might think he was being ignored."

"I'm so sorry," said Jordan, turning her attention back to him. "I must have gone to space for a second. What were you saying?"

"I was just saying that it looks like rain."

She looked up at the velvety clouds bulging around the moon. "Oh. Yeah, it does."

"Mind if I ask what's got you so deep in thought?"

She hesitated, taking another sip of her drink to buy some time. "Just work. A batch of seedlings aren't doing as well as I'd hoped."

"Jordan," he said in a chiding tone. "We've been dating how long now? Three months?"

Thirteen weeks to the day. She knew the exact length of time not for sentimental reasons, but because they went on a date every Friday at 8 o'clock on the dot. Sometimes their weekly date stretched into a full weekend in New York, but Chase was a creature of habit. Even the itinerary of their dates followed an exact formula. Dinner, then a movie or some other form of enjoyable but predictable entertainment, and then back to his place for sex. Then they would cuddle until they both fell asleep and he would drive her back home in the morning after having a nice breakfast and coffee at the local cafe.

Chase scheduled every facet of his life, she had come to realize. Jordan didn't mind it, even though it had taken her awhile to adjust. After all, the fact that he devoted so much time to her when he had a life that was already filled with an abundance of work, family gatherings and social demands was flattering, to say the least. When it came to their time together, he always provided his complete and undivided attention--unlike her.

The fact that he had so little time left plenty for her continued studies with Hermes. Even though she had made it clear to Chase that she wasn’t interested in being exclusive, she had yet to touch her familiar since their fallout. He was being a brat about it, too, but her pyrokinesis hadn’t reared its head since the forest and neither had her next consort. The more time she had to sort it all out, the better.

"Yeah," she answered. “About that.”

"I would hope that after everything we’ve been through, you’d feel like you could tell me me what's on your mind," he said, taking her hand. “Especially considering we’ve literally walked through fire together.”

Jordan sighed. So far, his bad jokes were the only crime he seemed capable of committing. “We have, but…” Her gaze drifted across the street again. Yellow Dress was still there. “Chase, can I ask you a question?"

"Anything, love."

The woman--the Watcher, as Jordan had started calling her--had resumed her post staring up at the apartment above the clinic even though all the lights were out in the building. "Do you see that woman over there? The one standing under the street lamp?"

He craned his neck to look and narrowed his eyes. "The lamp in front of the animal clinic?"

"Yes," she said, taking a sip of her wine as she prepared for the inevitable confusion.

"The one in the yellow dress?"

Jordan choked on her drink and turned to look at him. "What?"

"Are you alright?" he asked, frowning in concern.

"I'm fine," she said, coughing. "You can see her, too?”

He glanced back toward the clinic. "Well, yes. She's plain as day in that ridiculous hat."

Jordan stared at him in disbelief. "I know this is going to sound weird, but humor me. Tell me what she looks like?"

He squinted. “She's middle aged, brunette… she's quite pretty, I suppose. Other than the clothes, I wouldn't say there's anything remarkable about her. What am I looking for?"

"Nothing," Jordan said, finishing off her wine. "It's just that she's been there for a while I thought I might be seeing things."

"Ah," he said knowingly, giving her hand a squeeze. "I figured it might be a witch thing."

Jordan watched him for a moment, frowning. "How can you be so casual about this? You're dating someone who can't even tell the difference between reality and hallucination."

"Seeing ghosts and hallucinating are two different things."

"That's exactly what I mean. How can you go from being an atheist to just accepting the idea of ghosts and witches and magic so easily?"

"I wouldn't say it's been easy," he scoffed, "And I'm not an atheist, I'm an agnostic. That means that I don't believe anything unless I see evidence for it in the natural world. After what happened in the forest, ghosts are hardly a stretch."

"Okay, but what if I'm crazy on top of the things that *are* real?"

"Jordan," he began in that gentle tone of his. "You've been through so much. After everything you've told me about your family these past few months, it would surprise me if you *didn't* have some cognitive glitches here and there."

"So you don't think I'm crazy?" she asked warily. Despite what all the townsfolk thought, the only thing that scared her about Chase was how little *she* scared *him*. He prided himself on his openmindedness, but in the blink of an eye he had been able to accept things about Jordan that had taken her a lifetime to come to terms with.

Of course, she hadn't told him *everything*. He knew that Hermes was her familiar, but he had no idea that her cat was actually a demon or that he could take human form whenever he wanted. He knew that the fire had been the result of her repressed powers, but he seemed to consider it a fascinating if tragic case study in psychic phenomena and little else. As grateful as she was that he neither ran from nor attempted to explain away the truth, she thought it might not be the worst thing if he at least pretended to wrestle with it from time to time.

"Of course you are," he said, placing a kiss on the back of her hand. "I'd be worried if you weren't after everything you've been through. It's part of your charm."

Jordan wasn't sure whether to be offended or flattered. She decided she was both.

"Not that I'd be surprised if you really were seeing the dead at this point," he continued. "That's what you think she is, isn't it? A ghost?"

"I thought so," Jordan murmured, rubbing the side of her neck. The only non-vanilla thing about the man was his kink for getting toothy during sex, but even though he’d never broken the skin, it still stung from the night before. "I guess not if you can see her, too."

"Well, when did you start noticing her?"

"Months ago. She seems to be focused on Darren," said Jordan. "Whenever I see her, she's watching his clinic, but only when he's not there."

The first hint of displeasure she had seen regarding the supernatural flickered on his face as he set his glass down. "I see."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said carefully. "There's just something I've been meaning to ask you, and I keep waiting for the perfect time to come, but between my work and your, uh, witchcraft, I don't think that’s ever going to come.

Jordan's heart skipped a beat. She might not have been there for the breakup that had taken place only in Darren's altered memories, but she had caught up on enough pop culture to know the beginnings of an, "It's not you, it's me," speech when she heard one.

"Forgive me if this seems out of the blue, but I've been doing a lot of thinking lately," he said, taking on a formal, almost grave tone. "About our relationship, I mean."

*Shit*. Three months of trying to work up the courage to tell him he was her destined consort and he was about to break up with her. Not that she could blame him. She wasn’t the most attentive of girlfriends, and the parts of her life he did know about were a hot mess.

"Things obviously didn't get off to an easy start between us," he began.

Jordan's thoughts began to drift. She didn't know what had taken him so long, but maybe her near-ghost sighting had finally pushed him over the edge. How exactly did a breakup with someone who’d been destined to fall for you work, anyway? Did Lucifer have to sign off on it?

She could already hear what Hermes would say. *“You’re supposed to be the Whore of Babylon and you can’t even keep a man who was made for you.”*

"Do you know what I thought when I first met you, Jordan?" Chase asked, drawing her out of her thoughts.

Jordan shook her head and found her throat too tight to speak. She both wanted him to put her out of her misery and to put it off for just a little longer. She shouldn’t have been relieved, or devastated, and yet both emotions were there. After Darren, she’d put up a wall and she wasn’t sure when Chase had climbed over it, but the emptiness in her core left no doubt that he had. The relief came from knowing that the moment she’d been expecting had finally come. Maybe there wasn’t a need to turn his world upside down at all.

She didn’t love Chase. She wasn’t sure she *could* love anyone anymore. Not the way she’d once loved Darren and still did, if she was being honest with herself. Even so, Chase was becoming dangerously familiar. She didn’t want to become dependent on his presence in her life, knowing there was such a good chance he wouldn’t want to be in it if he knew the truth. There

was still the matter of Hermes *letting* him go, but the seal of flame was already unlocked, so surely his role couldn’t be that hands-on moving forward.

"I thought you were the most beautiful creature I had ever seen," he answered in the utmost sincerity. Coming from anyone else, those words would have seemed hollow, but he said them with such earnestness that Jordan could only believe that he meant them, no matter what pain the next words out of his mouth would cause her. She couldn't help but think that if he let everyone else see this side of him once in a while, maybe they would come to accept what she had somehow known from the beginning: That he was far from the monster they all thought he was.

“Chase, you don't have to --"

"No, please," he said, stroking her cheek. "Let me say the words before they fail me again. It wasn't just your beauty that made me want you from the very first moment we met. There was a light inside of you that it felt like only I could see. For the first time since I came into this world, I felt like I was home. I've always felt like there was someone out there—a soulmate, if you like--who belonged to me. Now I know it was you. It was always you…”

Jordan stared at him in confusion. Leave it to Chase to turn a breakup into a confusingly poetic speech. Of course he had to pick breaking up as the one thing he *wasn't* good at. “Chase, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I knew you were mine from the moment we met," he said with a soft chuckle. "Of course, I was under no delusion that you had the same experience. The very same force that drew me to you seemed to draw you to Darren. I thought I’d missed my chance, and then you broke up. Do you know what I felt then?"

Jordan hesitated. “I don't know. Relief, I guess?"

"You would think," he mused, taking a sip of his wine. "I thought that's what I would feel myself, until it actually happened and I could feel how much pain you were in. You see, in that moment, I realized that I wasn't the same person anymore. I realized that you had changed me."

"How?" she asked, bewildered.

"The old me would have given it a week at most before he 'accidentally' bumped into you around town," he said, swirling his glass. "He would have done whatever it took to charm you and sweep in while your guard was

down. He would have taken what he wanted and left you to pick up the pieces that were left when he was done."

"Why are you telling me this, Chase?”

"Because I want you to understand, before I get to the point of all if this, that not all the rumors you've heard about me are false," he said, his voice rougher than usual. "I want you to know that even though I would never hurt you, it's not because I'm a good man. If I'm anything close, it's only because you've made me that way."

As the probability of him telling her he never wanted to see her again dwindled, Jordan found herself no less confused. “I’m sorry, but… what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that fate saw fit to give me a second chance with you," he said, taking her hand again. He rose from his chair without letting go of her hand. As he sank to one knee and pulled a small blue box out of his jacket pocket, Jordan's head spun in confusion. "Jordan," he murmured, holding her gaze earnestly, "You asked me how I could so easily accept the supernatural when I've never been a man of faith, but that's just it. I don't need faith when I'm with you. The unreal becomes tangible every time I touch you. Magic is the way your laughter chases away the darkest shadows in my mind and the sound of your heart beating as you lie next to me is the only hymn that's ever moved my soul. I still can't say I believe in God, but the fact that something as perfect as you exists in this terrible world is the best and only evidence I've ever found in his favor."

“Chase, this is all really sudden and I…” she trailed off, at a loss for any word that adequately described it. She was also trying to convince herself she was having another, far more bizarre hallucination. It was only then that she noticed the small crowd of passersby who had stopped to watch what was probably the biggest town spectacle since what had become known simply as the Condom Incident. The woman in the yellow dress was gone from her post across the street, but Darren and Allison had taken her place at the front door of the clinic. They were both watching the scene, to Jordan's horror. Allison leaned in to whisper something in Darren's ear.

"Jordan?"

Jordan quickly returned her attention to Chase, still reeling from the surreality of it all. Of all the times to be caught with her head in the clouds. "Yes?" she acknowledged him hoarsely.

The grin that spread across Chase’s face and the giddy murmurs of the crowd told her she had inadvertently given the right answer to the wrong question.

Chase rose to his feet and gathered her into his arms for a passionate kiss.

Not good. There was only one reason he’d be that happy…

"What did I just say yes to?" she laughed nervously.

Deep down she already knew, but the shock was making it impossible to react properly. The crowd was making it impossible to clarify the way she needed to. She couldn’t do that to him in front of everyone. They already had enough ammunition.

"To making me the luckiest man in Cold Creek, my love," he answered, giving her another affectionate peck on the cheek. He turned around and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, as if newly aware of the crowd. "Well, look what my spontaneity has done. Carry on, folks. Nothing to see here."

The crowd swarmed at his false modesty and before Jordan could process what had just happened, Chase was engulfed in a sea of men who were patting him on the back and muttering their congratulations. It was likely the first time he had been the center of the town's attention in a positive way.

A smaller crowd of women had descended upon Jordan and she tried her best to show her appreciation for the support and bestowals of congratulations for a decision she hadn’t made consciously at all. Fortunately, most of them seemed more interested in the ring she couldn't even remember Chase putting on her finger. She had barely even glanced at the thing, but when she did, she saw that there was a large blue stone in the center surrounded by diamonds and an elegant platinum band. It was certainly nothing like the austere wedding ring her mother had worn for years, even after her father had made millions off his congregants.

Jordan could only imagine what her mother would say about the ring, but reminded herself that it would probably be the last on the long list of things she would have to disapprove of when Jordan brought her back. It was likely that Chase—her accidental fiancé--would be at the very top.

When Jordan finally dared a glance at the clinic, both Darren and the woman in the yellow dress were gone. Jordan had a feeling she hadn't heard the last of either of them.

# THIRTY-FIVE

"SO, explain to me again how you accidentally got engaged?" Hermes asked, taking a sip of the lime-colored drink he'd just ordered at the bar. He was filling in for Tina, who was at home nursing a cold and likely kicking herself for missing a chance to go out with him. True to his feline nature, Hermes loved nothing more than being worshiped.

Jordan was just glad for the chance to break the news to him in front of someone else. He'd confronted her about the proposal as soon as she'd made it through the door, and invited himself along when she'd tried to use girls' night out as an excuse not to talk about it then.

"Yes," Cindy agreed. "I'm dying to know how that one ended up happening."

Great. Now Hermes had a partner in crime. "I don't know," she muttered. "I got distracted while he was asking the question and I asked for clarification, but I guess he thought I was saying yes to the proposal."

"If it was anyone else I wouldn't believe it, but since it's you I can kind of see that happening," Cindy mused.

"Thanks," Jordan said dryly.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Hermes. "You can't just marry him because it's awkward."

"I can't?"

"No," Cindy and Hermes cried in unison.

"Look," said Cindy, "before Henry, I had my fair share of boyfriends. One of my relationships started out as sort of a pity fling and got way too serious. I never accidentally accepted his proposal," she said pointedly, "but I did keep him on the line for way too long. Chase isn't exactly the deepest

ocean on the map, and I still don't think he's the boy scout you think he is, but it's obvious that he's head over heels for you. If you don't love him, you have to cut him loose now. It won't get any easier."

“I can’t do that,” Jordan said quickly, knowing only Hermes would understand why. “And I don’t want to. I do care about him. I’m just not in a position to make that kind of commitment.”

"You didn't seem to have any trouble making a commitment to Darren,” Hermes remarked.

Jordan glared at him. She knew he was punishing her for trying to get out of their conversation earlier.

"He has a point, dear," said Cindy.

Jordan sighed. "Darren turned out not to be the man I thought he was. With Chase, everything is very straightforward. He's predictable."

"Most serial killers are," muttered Cindy.

"Boundaries, Cindy," Jordan warned.

"I know, I know. Just so you know, the *rest* of the town isn't going to respect the fact that the full-scale police investigation he went through is off limits once you're Mrs. Murderer.”

"It does have a certain ring to it," Hermes mused, popping the olive from his martini into his mouth.

"Laugh all you want, but neither of you know him like I do," said Jordan.

"Said every murderer's wife ever."

"Cindy!"

"I'm just saying, dear, you need to be sure you know what you're getting into. Marriage is a big deal. As sure as you are that Chase is innocent, you need to be just as sure that you can give the rest of your life to him."

"I'm not," Jordan admitted. "I'm not sure of anything except that I don't want things to be over with him. If I break off the engagement, they will be."

"You can't get married just because you want to keep him around," Cindy said in a disapproving tone.

"No," Jordan agreed, "but it's not like we've set a date or anything. There's no point in making any rash decisions when I could feel differently tomorrow. Or six months from now."

That was assuming he didn’t walk out the door as soon as he found out what she was. Hell, he didn’t even know her birth name.

"I think someone finally took a look at that ring," said Hermes.

Cindy gave a wistful sigh. "What the boy lacks in depth, he does make up for in taste. *A blue diamond*. I didn't even think you could buy those."

"It's not the diamond," Jordan muttered. As a matter of fact, the only thing she liked about the ring was the fact that her fear of losing it was a distraction from her conflicted feelings.

"Then what is it?" Cindy asked. Jordan didn't appreciate her tone of utter bewilderment. "I know you're not the type to be drawn in by the money, but besides his looks, what could you possibly see in him?"

"Lots of things," said Jordan. "Not the least of which, he was my first."

"So he's comfortable," said Hermes. "We've already established that. If comfort is all you're looking for, you could just buy a memory foam mattress and save yourself the wedding. Or, you know, marry me and get my mother off my back."

Cindy giggled and Jordan shot Hermes another look. Was he just *trying* to make her life harder?

Dumb question, she realized. Jordan knew her friend wouldn't be laughing if she had any idea that Hermes' mother--if he even had one--was probably old enough to have had a front row seat to the dawn of man. He had taken to the role of “gay best friend” visiting indefinitely from out of town with great gusto. Only Jordan knew he had a darker side.

At least *one* of them was having fun.

"It's not just that," said Jordan. "He's sweet and attentive and he accepts things about me that no one else ever could," she said pointedly, hoping to remind Hermes that he needed Chase around just as much as she did. "Yes, he's predictable, and sometimes he's almost too understanding, but I think the only reason I have a problem with any of that is the fact that every other man in my life has tried to change me in some way. Even Darren. If I wanted an aloof authority figure who always looked down on my beliefs and changed moods like most people change clothes, I could just marry my father."

The silence that followed left her uneasy. "Guys, that was a joke. Arkansas isn't that bad."

Cindy laughed. "I was just thinking it's interesting that all the things you find most appealing about Chase could be boiled down to the fact that that he's *not* Darren."

"I was thinking the very same thing," Hermes said thoughtfully.

Jordan groaned, waving to the bartender to bring her another drink. “Keep ‘em coming.”

"You know we're just giving you a hard time because we love you," said Hermes.

"True," Cindy agreed. "Soon enough, Tina will be back on her feet championing Team Chase, so I'm just getting in as much of a say as I can."

"That's just it," said Jordan. "There is no other team. In case neither of you have noticed, Darren is knee-deep in wedding invitations and cake samples and they *have* set a date. Even if I was still carrying a torch for him--*which I'm not*--he's moved on."

"Cake samples," Hermes said wistfully. "I want a wedding."

"I could introduce you to the florist," said Cindy.

"Thanks, but I'm allergic."

"To flowers?"

"To commitment."

The bartender returned with a drink Jordan needed as much as she needed air.

"Anyway," said Cindy, "I'm not sure Darren has really moved on. Allison is like poison candy as far as Darren is concerned. She tastes sweet and makes him all loopy, but in the end she always leaves him puking up his own blood and guts."

Jordan winced. "As much as I appreciate the imagery, Darren is a big boy and he certainly doesn't need me playing Glenda to Allison's Elphaba."

Hermes gasped in feigned surprise. "Do you hear that, Cindy? Our little girl is all grown up and making pop culture references from the last decade."

"I never thought I'd see the day," Cindy said, smirking.

Jordan rolled her eyes, leaning on the bar. “Yeah, well, Chase took me to see the play in New York. He loves the arts. *See?* That's an original quality that has nothing to do with Darren. The man wouldn’t know the difference between a Broadway play and a soap commercial.”

"If by original you mean gay, then yes, your fiancé is very ‘original.’”

“Hermes!”

"All I'm saying is, he loves Broadway and I've never seen the man wear the same suit twice," he said defensively. "Popping The Question after a few months is a total closet case move in and of itself."

"He has a point," said Cindy.

"Trust me, Chase is *not* gay." Their sex life had made it clear that he had another side to his personality. It just wasn't the one everyone else thought.

"Ah, so that's it," Cindy said knowingly. "He's good in the sack."

Jordan sighed. "He's a very skilled lover and that's all either of you need to know."

"I bet it's huge," Hermes whispered loudly.

Jordan raised a finger under the bar and set the tattered hole in his jeans ablaze. He put it out before anyone could notice and gave her a venomous look. She smiled smugly into her drink. Suited him right.

"I'm beginning to get a better picture of his appeal," said Cindy. "Don't try to deny it, either."

"Okay." Jordan shrugged. "I won't."

Cindy's mouth fell open, scandalized. "Well," she said with a small laugh. "Someone's turned into a metropolitan woman. Must be all those trips to the Big City."

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm just done blushing every time a man looks in my direction. Chase and I are both adults who enjoy spending time with each other. It doesn't need to be any more complicated than that."

Learning the truth about her destiny was only one part of it. Chase might have been the one who'd taken her virginity in the official sense of the word, but Darren was the first man who'd touched her, the first who'd made her heart flutter with desire with a single glance. The further she got from that naive state, the sooner she'd be able to dismiss the ghost of his fingers down her spine and the hole he'd left when he'd torn out her heart by sharing her most intimate secret with another woman.

That was the plan, in any case.

"Until you get married because you don't know how to let him down," said Cindy. "Then, complicated will be the nicest possible word for it."

"Engagements can last a long time," Jordan said, reciting the same argument she'd been telling herself since inadvertently accepting Chase's proposal. "I've got plenty of time to figure things out."

Cindy sighed, climbing down from her barstool. "Whatever you say. I've gotta run. Family dinner isn't going to cook itself."

"*You're* cooking," Jordan asked doubtfully.

"Well, no, but the staff never gets it right if I don't supervise and the boys are coming over. I swear, they eat like a pack of wild dogs."

Hermes started coughing, his hand on his throat as he choked down his drink.

“You alright, dear?” Cindy asked worriedly.

“Fine,” he said, giving her a pleasant smile he reserved for people who didn’t know him. “Have fun.”

Once she was out of earshot, Jordan turned to Hermes and asked, “What was that about?”

“You’ll find out in time,” he said in a melodic tone. “Now that she’s gone, let’s get down to the brass tacks. How many spare bedrooms are there at your new hubby’s place? Because I’m going to need a big closet.”

Jordan arched an eyebrow. “That’s all? No lecture about how I’ve ruined everything?”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “No more than usual.”

“Then what the hell was all that hazing about?”

“Just having a little fun,” he purred, running his finger around the rim of the glass with a flirtatious glance that made Jordan’s heart skip for the wrong reasons.

“So you’re *not* upset that I’m engaged?”

“Of course not. If it keeps up appearances and keeps the stiff happy, it’s none of my business,” he said with a shrug. “I just hope you’re prepared to come clean before the wedding or get cozy with breaking your vows in four different directions.”

“When I tell him the truth, he’s not going to *want* to marry me,” Jordan muttered. In fact, she was counting on it.

“You’re probably right,” he said thoughtfully. “Better not tell him at all, then.”

“*What*?”

“The man obviously moves fast and we can’t have him running off because he’s jealous. *Or* getting in the way of your other consorts, one of whom should be coming along any day now, if my hunch is right.”

“I can’t just not tell him!” Jordan cried. “That wasn’t the plan.”

“The plan changed. You can thank your excellent persuasion skills for that.”

“I’m going to tell him, Hermes,” she said firmly.

“That’s your choice. But just remember, his seal’s already unlocked and I don’t really *need* him,” he warned, raising his eyebrows.

“Are you threatening him?” Jordan growled, feeling the flames burning at her fingertips again.

“Simmer down. I’m just saying, accidents happen. All those winding rural roads, to say nothing of the things lurking in the woods…”

“Fine,” she gritted out. “I won’t say anything to him. Yet.”

“That’s a doll,” Hermes said, patting the top of her head. Jordan’s eyes narrowed and she focused on his glass, causing the alcohol to bubble over. He glanced down at the drink apathetically. “I’m glad you find ways to amuse yourself. The life of a mid-rate attorney’s wife is dull.”

“Go to hell, Hermes,” she said against her better judgment, gathering her things.

“Too easy,” he said dismissively, taking another drink as Jordan left the bar. Sometimes she wasn’t sure if the animosity between them was due to the fight from months ago that they’d never quite smoothed over, or simply due to their relationship dynamic in general. She decided it didn’t really matter. She knew what she was to Hermes now, the same as she did with Darren. At least *he’d* been honest about it.

As Jordan set off for the store, if only to avoid running into Hermes at home, she was only half-conscious of her own attempt to keep her gaze straight ahead. When she realized she was avoiding the big blue building, she forced herself to relax, if only because she knew she couldn't avoid looking at the vet clinic for the rest of her time in Cold Creek. If she did go through with her engagement to Chase, that could very well be the rest of her life.

When something strange caught her eye, she told herself it was just one of the many townsfolk passing through the town square. When that strange something remained in the same position within her vision no matter how far she walked, that logical explanation seemed less likely.

Despite her best efforts, Jordan gave in to what seemed almost like a compulsion at that point and turned to see the woman in the yellow dress standing just below the street lamp. She was usually gazing up at the apartment, but this time she was looking directly at the clinic. It was a sure sign that Darren was at work inside, likely oblivious to the ever-vigilant presence that lurked outside.

Jordan screwed her eyes shut tight and quickened her pace toward the grocery store, more afraid of looking at the woman again than she was of tripping. The fact that Chase had seen her too *should* have been all the

consolation she needed, but when Jordan had dared to ask Cindy earlier in the day, she gave the same response as ever. There *was* no woman in a yellow dress. Jordan was left to wonder if Chase had just been humoring her to avoid causing her more distress. When she finally did venture a glance back, the woman was gone.

After making it to the grocery store with a little more than ten minutes to spare before it closed, Jordan quickly filled a basket with the things Mrs. Herrin had requested plus a few ingredients of her own. She had taken up learning to cook in the time she had between Hermes' lessons and her usual routine. Chase had already assured her that he didn't expect her to be the domestic diva her mother had tried so hard to mold her into, but she doubted he would mind it. Maybe if she tried the role on in bits and pieces, she could better assess whether a wife was something she could or even wanted to be.

After all, going out to eat every night wasn't practical and it was nice to have something else to focus on besides her constant struggle to reign in the power that threatened to surge with each passing full moon.

As Jordan counted out the bills and passed them to the girl behind the counter, something moved in her peripheral vision again and she turned sharply. When she realized that no one was there and that the cashier was giving her a strange look, she slipped her crumpled change back into her pocket and uttered a distracted apology before leaving.

Rather than pass by Darren’s building again, Jordan chose to take the alleyway. It was a much shorter route, but she had avoided it ever since Hank's attack. Still, it was better than running the risk of seeing the woman again.

"Excuse me?"

Jordan spun around and dropped most of the bags she was holding at the sound of the woman's voice. “Shit, you scared me,” she said, scrambling to collect the groceries. Fortunately, the only thing that seemed to be broken was one of her jars of curry paste rather than any of Mrs. Herrin's items.

The woman reached out to offer her an unbroken jar. "I think this one's okay."

Jordan reached out to take the fallen item. "Thanks. Sorry, I'm just a little --" She froze as her hand brushed against skin as cold as stone and she caught a flash of yellow before looking up. The woman might have been a

stranger, but there was something undeniably familiar about those light blue eyes and she would have recognized that yellow dress anywhere.

# THIRTY-SIX

"HELLO, JORDAN," the woman said in a warm voice that belied her frigid touch. "I didn't mean to frighten you, but I thought it was about time we met face to face."

Jordan tried to swallow but her mouth was so dry it might as well have been filled with sand. The alley that had been so muggy moments before was suddenly so chilly that it made bumps rise up all over her arms. Slowly but surely, fog was creeping across the stones that paved the alley.

"Who are you?" Jordan demanded, trying to look the part of the fierce witch Hermes was determined to mold her into. "Why have you been watching Darren, and how do you know my name?"

"I know who you are *because* I've been watching Darren," the Watcher replied, standing. Jordan left the upright grocery bags on the ground and followed suit. "You mean a lot to him."

"You haven't been watching him that closely if you think that."

The woman smiled knowingly. "Most people can't see me, you know. I didn't think you could either at first. Every now and then, a child will catch a glimpse of me in the corner of his eye. I guess they're more perceptive than adults."

"So you are a ghost," Jordan said warily.

"I guess that's as good a term for it as any," she said with a carefree little shrug. "You can just call me Natalie."

Well, that was a relief. Jordan was still more than a little unnerved that she was seeing a ghost, especially since she hadn't experienced any paranormal activity since Susan's last messenger run, but a ghost was better

than some of the other creatures Hermes had warned her about--including demons.

"I still don't understand why I can see you," said Jordan.

"Aren't you a witch?” There was something vaguely familiar in the way her eyebrows knit in confusion.

"Yes, but you're only the second ghost I've seen. I thought my antennae were broken."

Natalie scanned the alleyway and Jordan noticed that, much like Susan, she seemed just as solid as her surroundings. Unlike Susan, this ghost existed in reality rather than a transient dream world, which was somehow even more unnerving. If she had been transparent or seemed even the slightest bit off, it would have been easier to accept her for what she was.

"You can't see them?" she asked, turning back to Jordan.

Jordan glanced around nervously. "Who?"

The ghost hesitated, resting her hand over mouth. "This is very strange."

“No offense, but I think that's my line."

"Like I said, ghosts aren't used to being seen," Natalie said, smoothing down her skirt before she leaned against the brick wall around the same spot Hank had thrown Jordan into. "What's even stranger is that you can see me but you can't see them."

"Them?" The question sounded more like it came from a scared little girl rather than a grown woman, much to Jordan's chagrin. She straightened her spine and reminded herself she was the harbinger of the apocalypse. Surely she could handle one little specter.

"Well, yes," Natalie said, as if it should be obvious. "Cold Creek has its fair share of restless souls. They're all around us. I'm sure you know about what happened at the factory by now."

"I do," Jordan said carefully. "Darren told me, but are you saying that souls who don't find rest just wander around wherever they died?"

"More or less."

"Why?"

"Spirits tend to hover by anything with a strong emotional connection to their death," Natalie said patiently. "Most often it's a place, but it could also be an object or even the person responsible for their death." Jordan didn't like the way her voice changed as she spoke those last words.

"Are you implying that Darren was responsible for *your* death?"

"No, of course not," she said softly. "I'm here because I believe Darren is in danger."

"Danger?" Jordan frowned. "From who?"

Natalie stared intently at her for a moment. Her silence lasted so long it made Jordan uneasy all over again. "From you, Jordan."

"Excuse me?"

"At first I thought it was intentional, but after observing you and now talking to you, I don't think that's the case," she said with a sigh. "Nonetheless, you're the reason he's in so much trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble?" Jordan asked in disbelief.

"I know what you did at the hospital. I know about the deal you made with that demon to bring Darren back from the dead."

"Then you know I did it to save him," Jordan said earnestly. "I would never hurt Darren. I even made sure he wouldn't remember what happened so I could keep him away from all of this," she said, gesturing to the invisible spirits around them.

"You can erase a memory from the mind, Jordan, but you can't erase the imprint it leaves on the heart," Natalie said gently. "I'm afraid that all you've done is make Darren more a part of our strange world than ever."

"*How*?"

"He's still connected to you," said Natalie. "He's bound to you, actually, as surely as you are bound to that demon. Didn't anyone ever warn you to always read the fine print before you sign a contract?"

Jordan looked away, embarrassed. "It was kind of an emergency. Darren was dead. I had to do something and there wasn't any time to waste."

Natalie laughed. "Dying is a funny thing like that. It happens in an instant and an eternity all at once. I know he was dead. I was there to greet him. I held him safely in my arms and soothed his pain until he was ripped away from me--at least, most of him. A piece of his soul got left behind between worlds and I believe it made its way into your hands," she said with a pointed glance.

Jordan frowned, looking down at her empty hands. Save for some spilled flour, there was nothing notable on them.

"The living always take things so literally," Natalie said ruefully. "I see your demon master keeps you on a need-to-know basis, so I'll just say this. You didn't really bring Darren back, not all the way. The thing you brought

back may look like Darren and act like him so much that he can fool even himself for a time, but that's about to change."

"What are you talking about?" Jordan asked, instantly on guard after the change in the woman's tone. She was still hurt by Darren's betrayal, but she didn't appreciate anyone referring to him as a thing.

"All monsters are forced to take their true form on one full moon each year, even demons," Natalie said, holding Jordan's gaze. Those blue eyes were even more familiar with the new intensity that shone through them. "'For everything that is hidden will eventually be brought into the open, and every secret will be brought to light,' to put it into terms you'll understand," she murmured, quoting what had been Marla's favorite Bible verse. Hearing it out loud both filled Jordan with nostalgia and made her shudder. "The moon that governs the infernal dead is close. When the worm moon rises, Darren's transformation will be complete unless *you* stop it."

Jordan struggled to process everything she was saying. Was Natalie really trying to convince her that Darren was becoming some kind of monster? "Stop it?" she finally asked. "How?"

"You have to release his soul. If it isn't released before the worm moon, he'll be damned just like you are."

Jordan winced. She had already figured as much, but having it confirmed by a third party was hard to hear. "Uh, I know this probably makes me a shitty witch, but when *is* the worm moon?"

"That depends on what month it is now," said Natalie. "Time is a bit fuzzy on my side of reality."

"It's February," said Jordan.

The ghost's eyes widened.

"What is it?"

"It's next month," Natalie said in an urgent whisper.

"Why did you wait until now to tell me?" Jordan cried.

"I couldn't. You have quite the vigilant entourage."

Jordan frowned. "You mean Hermes?"

"You can't tell him we spoke."

"Why not?"

"Do you really think he's just going to hand over Darren's soul because you asked nicely?"

Jordan hesitated. "He might."

Natalie shook her head. "Your parents sheltered you from everything, and yet here you are cozying up to a demon. The demon Hermes will let Darren's soul come to ruin without a second thought and he'll do the same with yours when your contract runs out. Has he told you what demons do to souls once they're done using the vessels, didn't he?"

Jordan grimaced. "He said they're eaten."

Natalie gave a dry laugh. "Yes, you witches get the VIP treatment. What they do to the others isn't fit for speaking out loud."

"How do you know that?"

"Let's just say the dead gossip more than the living do."

"I'll do whatever I can to free Darren's soul," Jordan promised, "but what if I can't release it before the full moon?"

"It's likely you won't have to," said Natalie. "They've caught wind of what you did on the other side and they're not happy. Raising the dead isn't a crime that gets a slap on the wrist, Jordan."

"The other side? You mean --"

"Heaven," Natalie said, folding her arms. "In not even a year's time you've gone from a runaway preacher's daughter to Heaven's most wanted. Everyone knows who you are by now. There's a damn good chance I'm the only spirit you've seen because no one else wants to be caught talking to you. No one wants to cross paths with an angel."

The word sent a cold chill right down Jordan's spine. "Angel?"

"Yes, I assume you're familiar with them?"

"Unfortunately. You mean Michael, don't you?"

"He's among them, yes. Darren will just be collateral damage when they come to punish you for what you've done and it's only a matter of time. Hermes can't protect you forever."

"How do I stop it?" Jordan asked, her heart pounding. "How do I release his soul?"

"*You* can't. Turn yourself in, Jordan. Tell them you'll release Darren from your bond and maybe they'll have mercy on you both."

"But I don't even know where his soul is."

"That's probably for the best. They can't torture it out of you that way."

Jordan's eyes widened. "They're angels." Her own experience had left her with no illusion that they were the cute fluff-winged creatures that were found in children's Bibles, but torture seemed a bit too far in the outfield, even for an angel.

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly, "and you ceased to be human in their eyes the moment you broke the code of nature and raised Darren from the dead. Witches are the pawns of demons and Heaven has no mercy for your kind."

The ghost's words sank in and Jordan felt a tightness creeping up her throat like hands choking her from the inside. "I'm not like the other witches. I've kept my hands clean."

“You’re still the Whore of Babylon. You think they care what you have or haven’t done when they know what you’re capable of?” she challenged. “I'm only warning you about the inevitable, what you do with the information is your choice. The angels are coming and you can't stop it, but you can control how many people go down with you.”

Jordan only realized she was cracking her fingers when the hard edge of one of the diamonds on her ring dug into her thumb. It was a bad habit she’d never kicked.

If what Natalie was saying was even half true, it confirmed the bits and pieces Hermes had told her. *One month*. One month and it wasn’t just his life on the line. He might not have believed he had a soul, but Jordan knew enough about Heaven’s ways to know that they wouldn’t be merciful. Not to anyone who was remotely connected to her. "And if I can convince them to put his soul back, Darren will be okay?"

Natalie reached out to place a hand on Jordan's shoulder and, for a moment, it was warm. "Yes. I'll make sure of that myself."

"How will the angels even know where to find his soul? What if Hermes won’t give it up?” She knew he wouldn’t. He was willing to kill Chase if she bucked his authority, let alone a man who had zero worth in his “plan.” If she breathed a word of this to her familiar, they were both as good as dead *and* damned.

"I'll take care of that, too, when the time is right. Until then, it's better if you don't mention my involvement to anyone, especially not to Hermes.

“Why should I believe you?”

Natalie laughed. “You and I might not share a history, but we have something even more important in common."

"And that is?"

"We both love Darren deeply," she said in a sad whisper. "We both want what's best for him."

Jordan considered her words and struggled to form the question she'd been afraid to ask from the beginning. "You're her, aren't you? You're his mother."

Natalie smiled serenely. "Is it that obvious?

“I figured you were either her or Jessica.”

“Ah, yes. That poor girl.”

Another question Jordan knew she should ask hovered on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t bring herself to. It felt like betrayal. She didn’t want to believe it was fear that held her back.

"For what it's worth, I was rooting for you two. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"Me, too," Jordan said, biting her lip. "I don't suppose you have any idea of how to summon an angel? That hasn't exactly been on the lesson plan."

"Have you tried saying a prayer?"

Jordan frowned. “My childhood was mostly praying and asking for forgiveness for sins I didn’t commit. Never got an answer then, so I don't see why they'd start listening now."

Natalie bent down to pick up the grocery bags. "I think you'll find Heaven a bit more responsive now that you're calling from a different area code."

"What are you doing with Mrs. Herrin's groceries?" Jordan asked.

"Let's just say I owe her a favor. It's my little way of saying goodbye."

Before Jordan could ask what the favor was, Natalie walked clear through a solid brick wall and disappeared.

Jordan trudged down the path in a daze. Before she knew it, she was back at the little white house she had called home for nearly a year.

The front door flew open and Mrs. Herrin appeared, dragging Jordan inside her apartment. “Come quick! You're the only one who'll believe this."

When Jordan made it into the apartment, she half-expected to see Natalie standing in the living room. Much to her relief, nothing seemed amiss other than the grocery bags that had mysteriously made their way onto the counter. "What is it?" Jordan asked innocently.

Mrs. Herrin planted her hands on her hips. "You didn't bring these groceries in here, did you?"

"No," Jordan said carefully. Of all the times to lie, this would have been one of them, but she knew that Mrs. Herrin would see right through it

anyway.

"I didn't think so. I was cleaning and bent over here behind the couch to pick up the remote and when I turned around, they were just there," she said, more animated than Jordan had ever seen her, hands flailing. "At first I thought, 'This is it. The old noodle is on its way out,' but then I saw her."

"The woman in the yellow dress?"

"Yes, she --" Mrs. Herrin spun around, frowning. "How did you know that? Did you see her, too?"

"I did," said Jordan. "She took the bags while I was bringing them home."

Mrs. Herrin shook her head, laughing. "That Natalie was always a trickster. I don't know how such a sullen boy came out of her."

Jordan couldn't help but smile. "I don't know, I could see the resemblance."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"Not much," Jordan lied.

"I should ring Darren..."

"No," Jordan said quickly. "Don't do that. I mean, you know how he is. He wouldn't believe you anyway."

"That's true," Mrs. Herrin said with a heavy sigh. "It's just a shame. I wish he could see her."

"Maybe he will," Jordan said softly. "She certainly seems to be making the rounds."

# THIRTY-SEVEN

ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT came and went and Jordan found herself back at Chase's apartment, as usual. He was in the kitchen making coffee, and she had made a game out of estimating exactly how long it would take him. She glanced up at the clock as it struck nine-fifteen and smiled when he came out carrying two mugs. The man was clockwork: precise and reliable.

"Thanks," she said, taking her mug.

"Non-dairy cream and sugar, just the way you like it," he said pleasantly, sitting down next to her.

"You always remember," she said, leaning in to kiss him. He remembered damn near everything she'd ever told him, which made it all the harder to keep her stories straight when it came to shielding him from Hermes. Hopefully that would be an easier task when she was no longer the demon's plaything.

After the most restless night of her life, Jordan had come to the decision that she was turning herself in. It helped that Hermes hadn't come home at all that night. The fact that she missed him was all the more reason to sever their bond.

After all, he had broken the only promise he'd ever made to her. He'd lied about Darren's soul, about bringing him back, about everything. It was all based on a sham, and it wasn't even a particularly enticing sham at that. Giving him her own soul wasn't such a sacrifice when it had never really been hers anyway, but Darren's was another matter. She wasn't going to let him become collateral damage, and as much as she had reason to despise the only angel she had ever encountered, now that she knew whose team he

was playing for, she had to hope that the others were at least somewhat more trustworthy.

Sure, Michael wanted her power the same as Lucifer did, but at least he wasn't just serving himself. If she could just reason with him, she knew she stood a better chance at getting him to protect Darren and Chase than appealing to Hermes' lack of morality. Now there was just the matter of cutting the last thread tethering her to the living world. It was a world she knew now she would never truly belong in, not the least of all because she had been created to bring about the end of it.

"What's wrong?" Chase asked, pulling her onto his lap. "I can tell something's been bothering you all night. Is Hermes missing again?"

"He is, but that's actually a good thing," she muttered. As far as Chase knew, Hermes was just a cat who had a habit of running off, and if all went according to plan, that's all he would ever be. She had managed to keep them apart when Hermes was in his human form and assured Chase that the cat had gotten his attitude from his "namesake" who happened to be visiting. "There is something I want to give you, though."

"Oh?"

Jordan leaned over and pulled a sealed envelope out of her purse. When Chase reached for it, she held on. "This is for you, but I need you to promise me you won't open it until tomorrow."

He frowned. "What is it?"

"Just promise. Please."

"Alright," he said, growing worried. "I promise."

Jordan released the envelope and he set it aside before moving his hands to her thighs. "Now you have me worried."

"Don't be," she pleaded, kissing him gently. Come morning, when he opened that letter, he would understand why he'd woken up to an empty bed. It was a coward's way out, but she knew he would try to stop her if she told him she was leaving town and she couldn't risk that he would tip Hermes off. Even when he was absent, the demon seemed to keep a close eye on her except when she was over at Chase's place. Whether it was because he trusted Chase to protect her as her unwitting consort or because he harbored some inexplicable jealousy, she didn't know. Either way, it might be her only opportunity to get away for a week. "It's not important. I just needed to give you that before we enjoy the rest of the night."

“Enjoy, hm?” His hands drifted further up her thigh, caressing her hips through her snug jeans. “Guess I can’t be *that* much in the doghouse?”

Jordan smiled against his lips. “You’re not in the doghouse.” If he was even capable of doing anything wrong, she’d yet to discover it. She slipped her shirt over her head, determined to make their last night together one that would at least somewhat dull the sting of the letter’s contents. “Quite the opposite.”

“Now that’s good to hear,” he said, helping her out of her jeans. Their lips met again as Jordan unbuttoned his pants. Chase was nothing if not romantic, and their evenings together usually progressed at a slower pace, but her desire for him was second only to her need to forget what she was about to do.

She stroked his shaft and relished the feel of him growing hard in her palm. His tongue dipped between her lips and he tasted as clean and crisp as ever. She rose to guide herself down onto him, already slick with need. She felt the familiar rise in her energy as their bodies became one and the magical union only enhanced the physical sensations.

“Jordan,” he whispered, running his hands down her back as she bucked against him. Gone was the clumsy uncertainty she’d felt during their first encounter. She knew his body as well as her own now and when she was in his arms, it was so easy to forget the others she’d yet to meet.

Moments like this, she cursed her fate the most. Sometimes she doubted whether she was whole enough to ever live the kind of life Chase longed for and thought her fit for, for some odd reason. Moments like this, she wanted nothing more, but it just wasn’t in the cards. He would come to understand that in his own way, and one day, she would be nothing but a bad memory of the one who’d got away. He would find someone who deserved his cheesy jokes and quiet devotion, and he would be spared the fate of belonging to a monster who didn’t even belong to herself.

The only time he ever lost his composure was when they made love, and that was what made the experience so intimate. As he came, he filled her soul with fire and Jordan kissed him to drink down every ember. She moaned as her own climax followed and whatever exchange it was that took place between them ironically filled her with the strength she needed to leave.

Long after he’d fallen asleep, Jordan rose and dressed quietly. She watched him for a moment, his face so serene and perfect in the moonlight

coming in through his skylight. Her heart ached like she was leaving half of it behind, but she told herself it was better for him than sticking around to wait for it to be divided even further. He deserved better than all of this, and if giving him the chance to live out a normal life was a result of saving Darren's soul, all the better.

Jordan pulled on her leather jacket and shook her hair out of the collar. She left the letter on the nightstand and grabbed her purse even though she knew she wouldn't be needing the practical contents where she was headed. There was just one more task to complete.

The town square was empty for once. At least one ghost was about to be laid to rest. She walked toward Darren's building and froze when she got the distinct feeling that she was being watched.

Had Hermes tracked her down? He'd been inside of her mind once, so there was no telling just how far his surveillance reached. She walked faster until she heard someone move behind her and spun around to find herself staring at Max. His hands were shoved in his leather jacket, which was far more battered than Jordan's. His eyes were even golder in the moonlight and he watched her with a serious expression that made him look much older than the twenty-seven years he had under his belt, according to Cindy.

"It's a little late, isn't it?"

"I could say the same for you," Jordan said, folding her arms. "Do you make a habit of creeping around on women in the middle of the night?"

His mouth turned up at one corner. They hadn't spoken more than a word in passing since his attempt to reunite her with Darren at the festival and he was notably absent wherever she happened to be present at the events Cindy invited her to. Jordan couldn't blame him for taking his friend's side in the breakup, but he'd made it clear she was persona non grata in town as well. She was surprised he was being remotely civil now that no one was around.

"Depends. Do you make a habit of creeping around your ex's place in the middle of the night?"

It was a fair question, to Jordan's chagrin. Darren's building was pretty much the only thing there was on that side of the street and she didn't have any decent excuse for being there. "I was just heading home."

"Your house is that way," he said, nodding down the road. "Aren't you witches supposed to be good at directions? Calling the corners and all that."

"You know a lot about witchcraft for a normie," she shot back.

Max gave a husky laugh that should have made her skin crawl. It had the opposite effect. “Oh, baby, I’m anything but normal,” he taunted, making no secret of the fact that he was checking her out. “Too bad you’re Darren’s girl.”

Jordan cocked an eyebrow. “Where do I even begin to address everything that’s wrong with that sentence?”

He chuckled again and she reminded herself that punching a guy who was related to every public official in the area was not the best way to skip town without drawing attention. “If you ask me, he made the wrong choice. Allison’s hot, but feisty and curvy never gets old.”

“How about a boot between the legs? Think that’ll get old?”

He just stood there smirking and looking like the poster boy for every bad decision every good girl had ever made. “You should run along, Jordan. It’s not safe to be out alone at this hour, even in a town like this.”

Jordan glanced up at Darren’s building and thought of the letter in her pocket. She had debated whether it was a mistake to even write it and figured this was the universe’s way of answering. “Whatever,” she muttered, turning to head back home. She had a date in the forest, even if she didn’t know who it was with yet.

“Wait,” Max called.

Jordan turned and waited impatiently. “What?”

“That cat of yours,” Max said gravely. “Something’s not right about him. You should be careful.”

*Now isn’t that the understatement of the year?* thought Jordan. The aptness of Max’s warning was second only to the randomness of it. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, walking back toward the house. This time, Max didn’t try to stop her. Once he was out of sight, she started to relax even though she was sure the sense of calm that had come over her was the same that passed over anyone who’d resigned themselves to certain death.

With all her affairs in order, all there was left to do was face the piper. Jordan passed the house and walked deeper into the forest than she ever had. In fact, she made it so far that she passed the charred ring of earth that marked the first place she and Chase had made love.

*Guess this is as good a spot as any,* she thought, kneeling down inside the circle. It had been the epicenter of demonic magic not so long ago. Maybe that would get Heaven's attention.

As she settled on her knees and folded her hands, Jordan wondered when kneeling to pray had become a foreign act while kneeling at her altar had become second nature. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath that faltered on its way out with the realization of what she was about to call down upon herself. Even more terrifying was the prospect that it might not work at all.

"Dear, uh, angels," she began awkwardly, "I know I'm not supposed to pray to you and I'm sure I'm not doing it right, but I figure I've already sold my soul to a demon, so this is probably just like a misdemeanor in comparison, right?"

She opened one eye just to make sure no one was standing at the ready to smite her before proceeding. "Anyway, I really need to talk to one of you about Darren St. Clair's soul. There's been a mistake and I'd like to make a deal." She winced. "Okay, that sounded a lot less like extortion in my head than it did when I said it out loud. Let's try that again. I'd like to give his soul back, free of charge, as long as you promise to put it back together."

Jordan was silent for a long while, waiting for any sign that anyone was listening. *Feathery bastards.* "Come on. Nothing? I'm the Whore of Babylon, in case you guys forgot," she yelled at the sky.

Still no bites. Growing exasperated, she muttered, "Did you ever think maybe the other side gets all the action because their customer service is so responsive? I signed my soul away on a tablet, but after serving God faithfully for decades, I can't get as much as a peep on your end. How is that fair?"

"In case you haven't noticed, life ain't exactly fair, little lady. What on earth made you think the afterlife would be?"

Jordan jolted as a male voice with a thick Southern twang answered her vent into the void. She spun around to face what appeared to be a tall young man with his hands slipped into the pockets of a pair of snug blue jeans and a fitted plaid shirt that hugged his muscular torso. A narrow-brimmed hat covered his medium-length brown hair and completed the cowboy aesthetic he seemed to be going for. As he sauntered toward her, Jordan scooted back further into the circle, as if it afforded her any kind of protection.

"Unless that's an Enochian banishing circle, I'm afraid it won't do you much good," the stranger drawled. He came to a stop in front of the circle and paused for a moment. A wide grin spread across his face as he made a big show of stepping inside, unencumbered. "That demon's smart mouth

might've rubbed off on you, but it looks like you didn't pick up on any of his parlor tricks."

"Who are you?" Jordan demanded, leaping to her feet.

He took off his hat and held it to his chest in a gallant gesture as he came to a stop directly in front of Jordan. "The name's Samael, chief of the Watchers," he said warmly, extending his hand. When Jordan hesitated to take it, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her closer. "All my friends just call me Sam. I was planning on paying you a visit soon, but I have to admit, I never thought you'd beat me to it."

"The Watchers?" she asked warily, stepping away from him again. She didn't buy the down home charm act for a minute. That was the thing about Southerners, whether they were angels or not. They could smile and pretend to be your best friend one moment only to turn around and stab you in the back without a second's hesitation the next.

"'We whom God has set over the dead who rise,'" he said with an air of gravitas. "Or as I like to put it, Zombie Patrol. 'Course, the powers that be won't okay that for the official logo, but it's printed on our T-shirts and that's what matters."

"Zombies?" she asked in disbelief.

"Sure. The Book of Revelation took some creative liberties, but John got the gist of it. At the end of days, the dead are gonna rise up like a fresh crop of corn and the Watchers are around to make sure it all goes according to plan. Some bad ears pop up prematurely, though, your boyfriend being one of 'em."

"Boyfriend?" It took her only a second to realize he meant Darren. "That's uh, what I needed to talk to you about. But first things first, and please don't take this the wrong way… Are you *sure* you're an angel?"

Samael's hearty laugh reassured her that she hadn't offended him. "You were expecting what, a halo?"

"No, but you don't look anything like the angel I saw when I was young."

He cocked his head to one side. "That so? What did he look like?"

"Tall, blond, kind of pretty," she replied. "He was always wearing a really crisp white suit. At least, that was what he looked like in his human form."

Samael did a double take at her last comment. "Excuse me?"

"I only saw his other form once," Jordan said quietly. Once before her life had changed forever. "It was horrible."

The angel laughed nervously, shifting his weight to his other side. "I think your imagination was playin' tricks on you, little lady. Only monsters have more than one shape. Unless you saw a demon --"

Jordan pursed her lips. Lucifer certainly straddled the line, but she wasn't sure admitting they were connected would do her any favors. "It's not important. Can you help me save Darren's soul or not?"

"Save it?" He laughed. "You're the one who brought him back!"

"I know," she said, feeling the heavy weight of the guilt that never left, even if she could forget it was there for a few moments at a time. "I know it's too late for me, but it's not too late for Darren. He's not a zombie yet, right?"

Samael hesitated. "He's not a human, either. His soul is detached from his spirit and his body and it's getting further away as we speak."

"I know, but I have it," she said eagerly. "I don't know where it is, but Darren's soul is bound to me since I brought him back."

"Tell me something I don't know," he said, clearly unimpressed.

"That's why I called you," she explained, "I know someone who *does* know where it is and I'll give it to you if you promise to put it back in Darren's body. Just let him go back to living his life the way he was supposed to and you can do whatever you want with me."

Samael stared blankly at her for a moment before clearing his throat. "If you go around making offers like that, it's no surprise you ended up a demon's bitch."

Jordan rolled her eyes. Even angels were typical men, it seemed. "Just put his soul back in his body and you can tell your boss you brought in the Whore of Babylon. I'm sure that'll look great on your resume."

"Now who told you I could do a thing like that?"

"A ghost."

He sighed. "Those damn ghosts, always eavesdropping and passing on what they hear Upstairs without getting the full scoop. It's like a paranormal game of telephone."

Jordan's heart sank. "She said the transformation wouldn't be complete until the next full moon, so it can't be that hard."

"Darren's body is only animated by demonic magic," said Samael. "More importantly, his soul is bound to a witch. Even if you release his soul

to my care, the spell will be broken and his body will go back to rotting like it should have months ago."

“And his soul?” Jordan demanded, trying not to panic. He had to be wrong. Natalie seemed so sure…

"It'll be free to move on," Samael said matter-of-factly. "Once the soul and body are separated, that's it. Those two ain't gettin' back together again. What’s dead is *always* dead.”

"And if the full moon comes and goes?" she asked shakily. "What happens then?"

Samael's eyes narrowed, taking on the harsh quality Jordan had expected all along. For a moment, it was easy to believe he really was an angel. "Then he becomes an abomination to life itself and it's my job to make sure that doesn't happen. Look, I'm sorry you were led astray, but coming to me was still the right thing to do. Ferrying souls to the afterlife is kind of my thing. I'll make sure your boy gets there safe and sound. Otherwise, it’s a one-way ticket to hell for both of you.”

Jordan shook her head. "I need more time. Turning myself in was one thing, but if Darren is going to die anyway, he at least deserves time to say goodbye."

"Sure he does," the angel said wryly. "So does the guy about to get creamed for pulling out in front of a speeding truck on Route Forty-Four, and so do all the people who're about to be killed by the first volcanic eruption in a hundred years on a remote little island in the Pacific. You think they couldn't all do with a little more time to tie up loose ends?"

"I understand that, but --"

"But what?" he pressed. "Darren is different because you care about him? The guy is a stone's throw away from eating brains for breakfast. As for you, well, I'm a hell of a lot nicer than the guy they were planning to send after you if things got much worse. Trust me, you're both better off sticking with plan A to come along quietly."

"There has to be another way," Jordan said, taking a step back. "I made a mistake trusting that ghost. I never should have summoned you."

"I ain't no demon, girl," Samael said with a crooked smirk as he took a step toward her. "I answer a call if I feel like it, but I don't get *summoned* for shit and you sure don't got what it takes to send me back where I came from."

Jordan turned and ran. She knew she couldn't outrun him, but at the very least, she hoped she could buy enough time to call for Hermes. When she looked behind her, the angel was gone. Before she could even look back in front of her, she collided with a wall of muscle and fell hard to the ground.

Samael reached out and grabbed her wrist, yanking her to her feet. His movement was swift, but he didn't hurt her. "Little lady, I ain't lookin' to get rough with a girl, witch or not, but don't think I won't."

"Let me go," Jordan cried, struggling to pull her arm free from his grasp. “Hermes!”

Samael stood by patiently, looking around the quiet forest. “Looks like your pussy cat is angel shy," he said, clearly amused.

Jordan narrowed her eyes and turned her anger into focus as she put what Hermes had been teaching her to use. The angel frowned down at his hand as it began to sizzle under the heat from her arm. He loosened his grip for an instant, but it was enough to allow Jordan to break free and kick him hard in the gut before she turned to run again. When she looked back, Samael was walking toward her at an easy pace, flexing his smoking hand. She’d only ever seen the look on his face before her mother had gone out into the yard for a switch.

"Hellfire. Cute," he said flatly. "Not nearly powerful enough to do any real damage, but cute."

Jordan stopped suddenly and held out her hand. She closed her eyes until she heard the roar of flame and looked up to find Samael surrounded by a ring of fire that came up to his shoulders. He looked around, then back at her with an exasperated sigh. To Jordan's horror, he stepped through the flames without so much as wincing. His flannel shirt didn't make the trip, but the rest of him was untouched. He brushed a few smoldering scraps of plaid off his chest and continued toward her at a steady gait.

"I *liked* that shirt."

Jordan took off again, hoping the trees would slow him down. Agility had never been her strong suit, but despite her generous curves, she was still a fraction of the angel's size and she could slip through spaces his broad physique would make difficult. She made it further than she would have thought was possible and didn't dare to look back.

When she saw the broad outline of a man standing still up ahead, she stopped in her tracks. Her heart pounded in her ears so hard she felt sure the thing would burst out of her chest.

"What part of angel don't you understand?" he asked, sounding almost more frustrated on her behalf than his. "You're weak, even for a witch. Your strongest natural gift is healing, something that *we* could have helped you nurture. It's a damn shame you picked the wrong side. At least we would have put all that potential you had as a child to good use. We would have protected you."

Jordan clenched her fists as the hypocrisy in his words made her anger outweigh her terror. "Protected me? Where were you when one of your own used my 'gifts' to kill all those people?" she hissed. "Where was Heaven's protection when my father kept me locked in an attic for a decade?"

Samael frowned. "What?"

She scoffed. "So much for protecting me. You don't have any idea what I've been through. When I needed help, it was a demon who offered it. Sure, I was a fool for trusting him, but I'd be an even bigger fool if I trusted the kind of monster that ruined my life in the first place."

"Listen, I'm no guardian angel and I certainly wasn't yours," he said, taking a step forward. "Even if I was, there's a system. A guardian can't always intervene when he wants to."

"Let me guess, 'Everything happens for a reason?'" she asked, stepping back. She knew there was no hope of escape at that point unless she could somehow buy enough time for Hermes to find her. Unless Samael was right and he had abandoned her. After she had learned all that he had kept from her regarding Darren's soul, she wasn't holding out much hope.

"Some things," Samael said ruefully, holding out his hand. "Please, don't make this any harder than it already is. Just come quietly and I'll do what I can to help you."

When Jordan turned to run for the last time, she barely made it a step before she was pinned against the angel's bare chest. He looked even stronger than he had with his shirt on and she wondered why she had ever thought she stood a chance against him, even for a moment. He stared down at her with something akin to pity in his gaze before he grabbed her wrists and spun her around so he could pin them behind her back. Before she could process what was happening, cold metal shackled her wrists together.

"Alyssa Hurlow, by the authority of the Heavenly H.O.S.T., you're now under arrest," he recited mechanically. All traces of his amusement had vanished. He turned her around again, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I hoped I wouldn't have to do it this way, but you've left me no

choice. I'll try to get you a fair trial and ask them to consider the fact that you voluntarily surrendered. If you behave, there's no reason for them to know you ever put up a fight. Understand?"

Tears of frustration streamed down Jordan's cheeks and the lump in her throat made it impossible to speak. She could only nod.

Not that she had any fight left in her. Not if Darren was going to die anyway. Her only hope now was that his mother would have a change of heart in what Jordan was beginning to think had been her plan to have him killed all along. She could only pray--to what, she wasn't sure--that Natalie wouldn't tell them where Darren's soul was.

"Good girl," Samael said, putting a hand on her back to steady her as he urged her to walk forward. Jordan obeyed in resignation, gasping when her foot rose off of grass only to fall onto a flat surface so white and smooth it almost didn't look real.

She looked up sharply and found herself in what appeared to be an office building. There were people in suits and business casual clothes bustling about, carrying papers and briefcases. There was a hallway with no fewer than a dozen doors on one end and someone disappeared down an identical hallway on the other end of the large desk stationed in the center of the room. A woman sat behind the counter, her black hair pulled back into a sleek bun as she typed something on a computer hidden behind her high desk.

Jordan struggled to process what had just happened. Teleportation? Wherever they were, she had a bad feeling it didn't have a physical address on earth.

“Where the hell are we?” she demanded, looking around the pristine office space. “Is this… Heaven?”

Samael watched her with folded arms and a knowing smirk. “‘Fraid not. You were a lot closer the first time.”

Jordan swallowed hard, straightening her spine as she forced herself to come to terms with the fate she’d always known she was destined for, long before she’d ever signed her soul away to Hermes. “I’m in Hell.”

“Sure are,” said Samael. “But there’s no need to look so shook up about it. Hell ain’t such a bad place to be, and there is a silver lining.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

His grin widened. “The Whore of Babylon? You’re a regular celebrity down here.”

# THIRTY-EIGHT

SAMAEL SMILED at her obvious dismay. "Now you see why I like to work in the field. This place makes me claustrophobic," he said, shrugging his shoulders like he was trying to stretch out. He kept his hand on Jordan's back as he led her over to the desk.

The woman behind the desk finally looked up and gave Jordan no more than a cursory glance. "It's not like you to make a personal delivery, Samael."

"This one's a special case," he said, leaning on the desk. "Alyssa J. Hurlow, known aliases including Cassandra Evers, Elsa Ryan and, currently, Jordan Adams. She's here for questioning and processing. Class-K witch, voluntary surrender."

The woman had been typing all of what he said into her computer but raised an eyebrow and looked up at the last part. "Voluntary surrender? A witch?"

Jordan frowned, wondering why Samael wasn’t telling the secretary who she really was. Usually it was the label of Whore that she found offensive, not the absence of it.

"I know, I was surprised too." He chuckled. "Be sure to make a note of that for the boss man. I'd like to handle the questioning myself, Sue."

Sue gave him a look. "You know Raguel won't approve of that."

"I know, but this is kind of a gray area between our jurisdictions," he said, lowering his tone so only she and Jordan could hear. "She came to me before the zombie situation could escalate to a matter of, you know, Biblical proportions. This is the kind of thing that could cause a big stir if it's not handled the right way and we need bad publicity like a hole in the head."

"I'm sorry, Samael," Sue said firmly. "Witches fall under Heavenly Transgressions, not the Transit Authority."

He clenched his jaw. "Fine, but there's additional case info he's gonna need and it's for an angel with arch-level clearance only. I'm sitting in."

"Take it up with Rag," she said, sliding a plain tan folder across the desk with a closemouthed smile. "I just handle processing. Sign, please."

"Oh, so you'll call *him* Rag, but I'm Samael," he muttered, snatching the file only to hand it back once he was finished signing it. His signature flashed so brightly that it stunned Jordan for a moment and left her blinking away the spots and tears in her vision. "I see how it is."

Sue shrugged, turning to Jordan. She lifted up a large, professional quality camera. "Say cheese."

Before Jordan could process her comment, the shutter clicked and another flash of light made her stumble. With her arms bound, she went straight forward and would have hit the floor face first if Samael hadn't grabbed her.

"Come on," he muttered, taking her by the arm to lead her down the hall.

"What was that for?" Jordan asked, still seeing spots. She struggled to keep up with Samael's long strides.

"Like she said, it's processing," he said, his mood turned sour.

"I get that, but processing for what?"

He gave her a wary glance before turning the corner down another seemingly endless hall of doors. "For Hell."

Jordan stopped suddenly, her sneakers squealing across the floor. Samael stopped and looked back, clearly annoyed. “You said we’re already in Hell.”

“This is processing, not holding.”

Jordan decided that she could happily go a lifetime without learning the difference. “Why didn’t you tell her who I am?”

“I did. Weren’t you paying attention?”

“I don’t mean giving her a list of my aliases. Why didn’t you tell her who I *really* am?” she demanded.

The dodgy way the angel looked around to make sure they were alone told Jordan there was more to it than him not wanting to have a big fuss. “Listen,” he said, guiding her over to a secluded hallway. “Who and what you actually are is a highly classified matter. If word got out that we let a

second rate demon run around for a whole damn year with the newly awakening harbinger of the apocalypse, there'd be a mutiny. Do you know what happens when angels mutiny? Because there are a few notable paintings from the Renaissance you might wanna brush up on."

"In other words, the higher ups don't want to let the worker bees know how badly they screwed up."

His mouth pressed into a hard, unamused line. "Ever heard of capture the flag, Jordan?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"In this scenario, you're the flag, the two teams are Heaven and Hell, and the winner gets the first shot at Armageddon. Now, there have been other potentials, but it's never gotten this far. I don't know if you actually give a shit or if it's all just an act, but if you weren't here, you could have been used to do a hell of a lot of damage. And I do mean that literally."

Jordan shifted uncomfortably, keeping her arms wrapped tight around herself. Hell was unexpectedly drafty. "Of course I care," she muttered. "I only went with Hermes in the first place because he promised to return the people I love."

"If that's true, then you have my sympathies," Samael said in a surprisingly genuine tone. "That was a promise he had no right to make."

"My mother and brother," she said uneasily. "He was never going to bring them back, was he?"

"Not them, no. Best case scenario, they'd end up the same as Darren. Looking and even acting like themselves for a while, but never quite right. By the time you realized how *wrong* they were, it would be too late for all of you."

Jordan swallowed the rage and betrayal crawling up the back of her throat. She knew Hermes couldn't be trusted. That wasn't news, so why did the realization that he'd lied to her about this sting so much?

"I'm sorry." Samael's big hand on her shoulder drew her out of her misery. "It sounds like you learned in the hardest way possible why you can't ever trust a demon."

"I didn't," she said, clearing her throat. "I was just working with what I had, but it doesn't matter now. What happens next?"

Samael's hand fell away and he watched her with something like pity on his boyish features. "All the damned go to trial, but this is a special case. Raguel will want to handle yours in a more intimate setting."

“Right,” Jordan muttered. “Do I at least get a lawyer?"

"Not that there aren't plenty down here, but no," Samael scoffed. "Sorry, just a little angel humor. Things don't work like that down here.”

"Okay, so how do they work?"

The angel took off his hat to rake a hand through his tousled brown hair. "Look, all you need to know is that it's better if you just do everything Raguel says. No sass, no arguing. Beg a little if you want, he's got an ego that'd make the devil cry, but don't rock the boat. He'll be your judge, jury and interrogator, so the less of a fight you put up, the better your odds.”

"Wait, an *angel* is going to decide my fate?" she asked, frowning. "What about God?"

Samael flinched, like she'd said a dirty word. "He delegates. A lot. Definitely don't mention Him in front of Raguel."

"But that's not fair," she cried. "What happened to 'only God can judge?'"

"It still makes a lovely back tattoo for drunken rednecks," he said in mock sympathy. "'Fraid it don't have much bearing on what we do here, though. Just keep your mouth shut unless you're kissing Rag's ass, and let me do the talking. With any luck, I'll be able to convince him you were just another preacher's kid who got led astray by demons, which ain't too far off from the truth judging from what I read in your file."

“Why does any of that even matter? I’m the Whore of Babylon, don’t you guys need me the same as Lucifer does?”

“All souls face judgment,” he said firmly. “As for your destiny, there’s a whole team of us dedicated to squelching the “potential” your kind shows each time one of you pops up. How do you think we made it this far?”

Jordan’s eyes widened. “You *killed* the others?”

“No,” he said harshly, wincing as he scratched his stubble. “Least, not on purpose. What happened in Paris was an accident, but that’s beside the point. We just stay on the lookout for high-risk candidates and over the centuries, we’ve gotten good at spotting them. We’re still angels, so when that happens, we create a supernatural quarantine the potential won’t notice and gently guide them in the right direction. AKA, *away* from Whoredom.”

“So what, you keep them in nunneries and watch over them until they die?” she asked in disbelief.

“Just until they’re past a certain age. And nunneries were definitely the easiest route up until a few decades go. Tabletop gaming’s pretty addictive,

so that effectively has the same result as cloistering."

"Guess that would've been preferable to my upbringing."

"Yeah… sorry we didn't get to you in time." He actually sounded like he felt guilty about it, too. "If I'd found you first, things would've turned out a lot different."

"So let me get this straight. You're basically the angel of the apocalypse, but you're trying to *prevent* it?"

He shrugged. "Just because I was created to handle shit come Judgment Day doesn't mean I want to see it come to pass if there's any other option. One way or another, when those trumpets sound, a lot of lives are gonna be lost on all sides."

"Believe it or not, that's what Hermes is trying to prevent. Or at least, that's what he told me."

Samael snorted. "Wouldn't put too much stock into that. Demons have a way of looking inside us and mirroring back whatever it is we wanna see."

"I guess so," Jordan murmured.

"Come on," Samael said, jerking his head for her to follow. When he opened a door at the end of the hall, there was already someone inside the room. A tall man—still a few inches shorter than Samael—with short salt-and-pepper hair was sitting at one end of a long metal table, looking every bit the part of police interrogator. Angel, not so much.

His eyes were of the same rich brown hue as Samael's, but they were somehow as cold as the table he sat tapping his pen on. When they entered the room, he looked up with such apathy that Jordan knew immediately why Samael had instructed her to appeal only to his ego rather than his heart. It seemed unlikely that he had one.

"I was told this was a special case and your visit would imply as much, Samael," said the man who could be none other than Raguel. He slid a folder identical to the one the receptionist had made Samael sign across the table. "Care to tell me why I can't find a single thing in her file that stands out from any other Class-K intake?"

Samael closed the door and motioned for Jordan to take a seat beside him on the other end of the table. "Oh, she's special alright. DJ7 ring any bells?"

That got Raguel's attention. He did a double take at Jordan and frowned. "You're telling me *this* is the Whore of Babylon?"

Jordan’s back straightened against the chair. Should she be insulted? Because she felt like she should be insulted.

“Would’ve been before long. I’ve been watching her ever since she signed a contract that pinged our radar,” Samael said, propping his feet up on the edge of the table. The gesture obviously irritated his coworker, but Raguel just scowled in silence. “Good thing she recognized she was in over her head and turned herself in voluntarily.”

“Voluntarily?” Raguel looked directly at Jordan for once, even though she still wasn’t sure he was actually addressing her.

“That’s right,” she answered. “And I’m willing to cooperate, if you’re willing to cut a deal.”

Samael’s mouth tightened in a “we talked about this” expression, but Jordan ignored him and kept her focus on Raguel, who was obviously his superior. The one good piece of advice her mother had ever given her was to never take no for an answer until you’d heard it from the top, and she wasn’t willing to give up Darren’s mortal existence without a fight. “I turned myself in for a reason. Darren St. Clair.”

Raguel opened the file in front of him and flipped through the pages. “Ah, yes. The veterinarian you were fornicating with.”

Jordan’s cheeks blazed. How much did they have on her in that file? “Cold Creek is warded. How did you even —“

“A ward is like a chain link fence,” Samael interrupted. His tone was gruff and his eyes glinted with irritation. He was kind of cute when he was pissed, thought Jordan. Too bad he was probably going to be the one who threw her into the Pit if Heaven didn’t actually have plans to use her after all. On the one hand, she was relieved. On the other, she wasn’t eager to find out just how literal that Lake of Fire really was. “Just because it keeps people out doesn’t mean they can’t see through. There aren’t too many small towns in America warded to keep angels out, so it wasn’t all that hard to find you once you popped up on our radar.”

Now she could understand why Hermes was usually so adamant about keeping her penned in. “Whatever. Can you fix Darren or not?” she asked, turning back to Raguel.

“His body is dead and his soul is quite literally in pieces. What, exactly, do you expect me to do?” the angel asked in a condescending tone that made his face so punchable.

Jordan kept her hands clasped in front of her so her fire wouldn't make any unplanned appearances. She wasn't even sure her power worked in Heaven, or that far away from Chase, but it was better to be safe than sorry because she'd accidentally lit a sanctimonious angel on fire. "You are the angel of judgment," she said, deciding to take Samael's advice and appeal to his ego. He was still a male. At least, she *assumed* he was packing more than smooth plastic under that million dollar suit of his. "I just assumed you would be able to work something out."

Raguel didn't seem to expect the flattery. He didn't seem self-aware enough to recognize it for what it was, either. Jordan caught Samael rolling his eyes. "I'm afraid once a soul is fractured, it's impossible to restore life to the body."

"Could God do it?" Jordan asked innocently. She knew she was taking a risk that she wouldn't just end up pissing him off even more, but she had to pull out all the stops if she was going to push through Heaven's bureaucracy to save Darren. Prick or not, he deserved better than eternal damnation or sudden death.

The jealous rage that flashed in Raguel's eyes told Jordan she'd struck a nerve, like she hoped. "It's not a matter of ability," he said curtly. His ego was practically hemorrhaging all over the place. "Darren's soul is fractured. The lion's share is already in the Vault."

"Which would be…?"

"It's where we keep the souls that are too damaged to move on one way or another until they can be repaired," said Samael. "Think of it as a hospital for souls."

"More like a storage room, really," Raguel said dryly. "The only reason Darren is still walking around is because he's close enough to the only shard of his soul that's left on earth and animated with demonic magic."

"But if I could get you that shard, you could put it back?" she asked hopefully.

"Theoretically, yes," said Raguel. "Whether I would is another matter entirely."

"You need me," she reminded him. "Or at least, you need to keep me on the shelf like all the other potentials, so you can avert the Apocalypse. What does breaking protocol for one person really matter in the scheme of things?"

Raguel looked over at Samuel, his arms folded calmly. “Would you give me a moment alone with Ms. Hurlow?”

Jordan winced at the sound of her birth name. She wasn’t sure if she should be relieved or concerned when Samael stood to leave, but when his gaze met hers, she knew.

“I need to know before you do anything with her,” he said firmly. “Basic holding’s not gonna be enough.”

“I just want to explain the gravity of the situation,” said Raguel.

Samael hesitated another moment before he left the room and Jordan felt his absence like a hole in the wall. Maybe she had picked the wrong angel to work on. Samael was a little rough around the edges, but there was something in the other angel’s gaze that made her every bit as uneasy as the first one she’d encountered.

“Tell me,” he said in an easy tone that made her anything but as he leaned on the table. “How many seals have you unlocked?”

Jordan stared at him, trying to understand the sudden shift in his line of questioning. She thought of lying but decided that information was the only leverage she really had with him. “Just one.”

“And that would be?”

She pursed her lips. “The seal of flame.”

“Ah,” he said knowingly, making a note in her file. “And do you have any idea who the other four are?”

“No,” she said, frowning. “What does that have to do with anything? As long as I’m away from them, I can’t break the seals anyway.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he just sat there watching her like he was studying the pieces of a puzzle spread out before him, trying to figure out how to fit them all together. “The demon must know,” he said, absently clicking his pen. Jordan could tell he wasn’t talking to her anymore, and the sound of the clicking was going to drive her insane.

“I’m sorry, could we get back to Darren? Because—“

“Darren is one of the consorts,” Raguel interrupted. “That much is clear, but if you’re too idiotic to realize that, I believe you when you say you don’t know the others.”

Jordan blinked. “Excuse me? Darren isn’t my consort. Hermes said —“

“Hermes is a demon. They lie,” the angel remarked, standing. Jordan leaped from her chair instinctively, but he made no move to come closer. Instead, he walked to the other side of the room and poured himself what

looked like a cup of tea from the set on a nearby stand. “The others must be inside the ward. He wouldn’t risk that.”

Jordan’s stomach churned. “He said he didn’t know who any of them were.”

“Mhm. That may be true, but I can guarantee you that he has a good idea.” Raguel took a sip of his tea and it was strange to see him standing there, so elegant and pensive as he discussed the fate of the world. “I suppose we could always send a localized storm or an earthquake that would leave only the supernaturals standing. That would certainly narrow it down a bit.”

Jordan listened, unable to make sense of his words. “What are you talking about?”

“The other consorts,” he answered patiently. “They’re all monsters in some form or another. It’s part of the prophecy.” He glanced over at the bookshelf across the room. “You know, it might behove you to read it sometime. Of course, you’d have to master Enochian, but…”

He set his teacup down and Jordan watched, him, bewildered. “You would destroy an entire town just to flush them out?”

“Ever heard of Sodom and Gomorrah?” he asked flatly.

“You can’t do that,” she seethed. “I won’t let you.”

“And what are you going to do? Light a match?” he taunted. “Seduce me.”

“Like hell, asshole.”

The angel’s eyes darkened. “Watch your tongue. I need your power, not your limbs.”

Jordan backed away from him. “You’re not like Samael,” she murmured. “You’re not trying to prevent the apocalypse, you’re trying to start it.”

“Michael and his groupies have no right to rewrite history. The prophecy must come to pass, and when it does, we’ll have the upper hand. Only an idiot would let this opportunity go to waste.”

“Technically, if it’s a prophecy, isn’t it rewriting the future?” Jordan asked, inching toward the door.

Raguel was onto her. Before her eyes, the angel teleported across the room and threw her against the other wall. She caught herself before her nose could get rearranged on the hard floor, but Raguel was coming after her. Jordan threw up her hand and a wall of flame engulfed the angel. It was

far more potent than any fire she'd called forth on earth and for a moment, she thought she'd won.

When Raguel stepped through the flame, her heart stopped. Not only was he untouched, but his suit was perfectly pressed without so much as a singed thread. "I'm afraid your little magic trick won't work here. After all, this place is its source."

Jordan turned onto her back, scrambling away from him until she hit a wall. She looked around the room but the only thing close to a weapon was a chair and somehow, she doubted that would do much against an archangel. Her eyes widened as Samael appeared behind Raguel out of nowhere and raised a finger to his lips to silence her. He pulled a revolver that looked like it belonged at an antiques show rather than in actual combat, but the bullet he fired into the back of Raguel's head exploded in a flash of golden light.

The angel hit the ground with a blank, lifeless expression. In a shockingly swift transition, his flesh turned deathly white and chalky like stone before it crumbled in on itself and all that was left was a pile of ash.

Jordan's jaw dropped open and she yanked her foot away from the newly formed ash pile. She'd heard of vampires turning to dust when they were staked, but an angel.

Samael holstered the smoking revolver and grabbed the arm of Jordan's jacket to pull her to her feet. "Come on," he muttered. "As bad as that looks, it won't take him long to cobble together a new body."

"He's still *alive?*" she cried, stumbling after him as he dragged her down the hall.

"Angels aren't physical beings. Our souls are floating up there with Source energy," he said, pointing sharply toward the ceiling. "When we 'die,' everything that makes us *us* floats around up there for a while and it takes some time to untangle and form into an individual again, but Raguel is strong. It won't take him long."

"Why did you save me?" Jordan asked once they stopped in front of a flight of stairs that didn't seem to have an end, judging from her point of view.

"I was listening in," he muttered. "We've suspected a mutiny for a while now, but until today, I never thought Rag was part of it."

"Can't you turn him in?"

“I’ll tell Michael and maybe we can keep him from respawning, but I have to get you somewhere safe first. Raguel isn’t working alone and I can’t risk one of his buddies getting their hands on you.” He looked down the hall, clearly troubled. “No telling who can be trusted. Move.”

He gave Jordan a push toward the stairs and she ran up them, hoping they weren’t really as endless as they seemed. She could hear Samael right behind her and when she finally caught sight of the stairway’s end, she stopped short. All she could see was a thick, unnatural darkness that seemed to have consumed the rest of the stairway and she wasn’t about to go through.

She turned to face Samael, but the look of determination on his face made her second guess the fear that he was double crossing her. Not that she could even remember when they’d ended up on the wrong side. “You have to go. It’s the only place that’s safe right now.”

“What is it?” she demanded. “You can’t expect me to just walk into a shadow without knowing what’s on the other side.”

“It’s Purgatory,” he answered, allaying exactly none of her fears. “I’m not saying it’s a five-star resort, but it’s a whole lot cozier than where you were headed before and Raguel *can’t* get you there. Only I have access to souls on the other side.”

“I’m not going in there! I have to get back to Cold Creek and warn Chase and the others. He’s planning on —“

“I know what he’s planning,” Samael snapped. “You let me worry about the angels. When the time comes, I’ll pull you out.”

“I’m supposed to believe that?”

“What choice to you really have?” he challenged.

It was a decent point. Jordan had never imagined that Hell was under the angels’ control. Nothing was at all like what Hermes had told her and she wasn’t sure what to believe anymore. Some part of her wanted to trust Samael, if only because he’d saved her from whatever the other angel had planned, but she knew it wasn’t logical. It was the same sense of familiarity that had lulled her into a false sense of security with Hermes, and look where that had gotten her.

“We don’t have time for this,” Samael growled, reaching for her hand. The moment he made skin-to-skin contact, Jordan felt the same surge of energy she now recognized as the mark of her consort. As far as she knew, it wasn’t a full moon, but it was anyone’s guess as to whether a concept like

that even mattered in Hell. All she knew was the undeniable bond that had formed between them with that single touch and when she finally met Samael's eyes, she could tell he felt it, too. The dread within them made it clear that unlike Chase, he knew exactly what it meant.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, jerking his hand back.

"I'm sorry," Jordan blurted out. It seemed like the right thing to say, and there wasn't an etiquette guide for consoling a very unhappy archangel who'd just realized he was your destined lover.

Samael shook his head in disbelief, but he wasn't looking at her anymore. He was fully in his own thoughts, but he snapped out of them just as quickly, his gaze locked on Jordan. "Don't worry about it. After this, we'll be even."

"After what?" she asked, confused.

He pushed her into the void without a word, but that more than answered her question.

Damned angels.

# THIRTY-NINE

*CRRRRREEEEEEEEAKKK.*

It was the sound of metal ripping, but that wasn't possible. There was nothing metal to be found in the version of eternal boredom the angels who governed Purgatory had cooked up especially for Jordan. It happened to be a walk-in closet outfitted with a mattress, a Bible, a pencil and notebook, and a stack of black books in the corner that reached the ceiling and filled up what little of the closet that wasn't taken up by the mattress.

She knew the scene well. It was the one she had lived every time her smart mouth or simple refusal to dance like a puppet at her father's services had earned her the ire of her parents. Her mother had once kept her in that closet for days until she felt that Jordan had "learned her lesson," but even Marla gave in eventually.

Jordan still didn't know how long she'd been in Purgatory, but it felt like a thousand years and not a day less. In the beginning, she'd taken comfort in knowing that she had to go insane eventually, if only from the repetitiveness of it. When the emotional equivalent of a few decades had passed, she realized that prolonged sanity must have been part of the simulation.

She turned her attention back to the book in her hands and the line she had scrawled onto the cur-rent page no less than a hundred times already.

*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*

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Jordan had scarcely had time to process the fact that Samael was her consort before she was thrust into the constant loop of punishment. In the

beginning, she had tried everything to escape. When she'd finally managed to break through the wall, she realized that there was literal nothingness on the other side. Even her attempt to fall into the void in hopes that she would either come out somewhere better or, worst case scenario, escape the constant loop, had only resulted in being dropped back into the closet to continue living out her personalized torment. She'd gone through the motions of hating Samael, resenting him for her eternal confinement, and even pitying him for the role he surely wanted no part in. Even if he had abandoned her, she couldn't help but hold out hope that he would keep his promise to protect Cold Creek from Raguel and his followers.

Once she had squeezed in the last line that would fit on the current page of her notebook, Jordan turned it only to realize she had reached the end of the book. She sighed, closing the leather bound cover and placing it carefully on top of the stack. She reached for another black book among the dwindling supply stacked beside the mattress and shivered when she realized that her "mother" would be coming soon to refresh the stock. It wasn't actually Marla, but the illusion was carefully crafted enough that it could only have been pulled from her own memories.

Before she could take the fresh notebook back to the mattress, the metallic ripping sound picked up at such volume that the entire closet shook violently.

An earthquake?

No, it couldn't be. There were no surprises in Jordan's personalized version of Hell. Nothing ever deviated from the routine. That was what made it a nightmare, after all.

When bits of plaster began to fall from the ceiling, Jordan fell onto the mattress and pressed herself back against the wall, shielding her head from the falling debris. All she could do was watch in morbid fascination as a pair of wild metallic claws broke through the ceiling and curled to rip away part of the roof, like it was made of paper.

For centuries, she had begged and prayed and hoped for something different and this certainly fit the bill.

*This must be it*, thought Jordan. As the years turned into decades and flirted with centuries, she had lost hope that the angels would ever come to bestow the final judgment she now longed for.

The closet shook again as the swirling pit of the void opened up in the ceiling. Two sets of claws poised around the opening as if ready to tear it

apart completely. When the face of the monster was revealed, she saw that it had horns like a ram's that curved back over its head, nested in hair so white it glowed. The creature's ears were pointed sharply and horribly sharp fangs slid past its smirking lips. Its skin was marbled, as if it was made of stone rather than flesh, but its eyes were what drew Jordan’s attention.

They were feline. Green. Familiar.

“Hermes?" Her voice was a raspy whisper after being out of use for so many decades.

"Don't look so surprised to see me, cupcake," he purred. "Did you really think Heaven's Gates could stop me from what's mine?"

Jordan staggered to her feet, unable to blink. "Your eyes. You have… *horns*." For the first time, he actually looked like a demon.

"At least I don't look like the Little Witch on the Prairie," he said, giving her outfit a disparaging once-over. "Is that gingham?"

Jordan looked down at the hand-sewn dress that had come with the package, then back at him. "How did you even get in here?"

"It would have been a literal hell of a lot easier if you hadn't gotten yourself locked up in maximum security," he muttered. "Lucky for you, you're my own personal key to Heaven."

Jordan's eyes widened. “How?”

“I own your soul and there’s nowhere I can’t find you. You're my witch bitch from here to eternity. Now, take my hand and let's get out of here," he said, reaching for her.

She hesitated, staring at his clawed hand. "You lied to me. You didn't tell me what I'd be doing to Darren if I brought him back."

His feline eyes rolled dramatically. "I didn't *lie*, I left out a few of the details. Hello? I'm a demon."

Jordan hesitated. If she took his hand, she’d escape one prison only to end up in another and she still didn’t know the full extent of his betrayal. “I can’t leave. The rest of Darren’s soul is locked up in the Vault.”

Hermes gave her an utterly bewildered look. *Now* he seemed like himself, horns aside. “Are you seriously going to stay in *Purgatory* because of your ex-boyfriend?”

“He’s more than that. According to Raguel, he’s my consort, so if you want my power, you have as much reason to save him as I do.”

The demon stared at her like he was trying to decide whether *he* could trust *her.* “Raguel said that?”

“Did I stutter?”

Hermes gritted his fangs and reached into the room to snatch her through the ceiling. When he put her down, they were standing on the roof of an isolated shed that appeared to be suspended in the middle of the same infinite void Jordan had fallen through. As she processed the diminutive reality of the place that had been her prison for so long and wasn't sure whether to sob in relief or scream in rage.

“Stay here,” he ordered before leaping off the side of the shed.

“Hermes!” Jordan cried, looking down as he disappeared into the nothingness. Her stomach churned as she thought of the endless fall, even though it seemed he wasn’t around to make it. Before she could figure out what to think, something landed on the shed behind her and she turned to see Hermes standing there, something clutched in his clawed hand.

“Where did you go?” Jordan cried. Hermes opened his hand to reveal a small, glowing white light within. Jordan’s eyes widened. “Is that…?”

“Darren’s soul,” he answered, snatching her left hand. As soon as he brought the light close, the blue stone in Jordan’s ring began to glow.

“What are you doing?” she cried. “What is that?”

“Two halves of the same whole,” he answered. “Hold still.”

Jordan watched in fascination as the white light rose off Hermes’ hand and hovered over the ring. The blue and white lights merged and when they both faded, only the stone was left.

“What did you do?” she asked, tearing her hand away. She flipped it over, examining the ring, but it looked the same as ever.

“I pieced Darren’s soul back together. You’re welcome.”

“What? Even Raguel said that wasn’t possible…”

“Angels lack imagination. You haven’t figured that out yet?” He sneered. “It’s not a permanent fix. The pieces are still split, but as long as you keep them safe and you’re in relatively close proximity of his body, he should be okay.”

“Are you saying my *engagement ring* was part of Darren’s soul this whole time?”

“I needed somewhere safe to put it, and at least it’s insured.”

Jordan let out a cry of frustration. She was torn between being relieved to see Hermes—to see anyone, really—and wanting to kill him, as usual.

“We need to go. It won’t be long before they figure out there’s been a breach,” he said, lifting her into his arms before she could protest.

“Hermes!”

He ignored her and leaped off the shed once more. As they plummeted into the void, Jordan's screams were swallowed up by the emptiness. After what seemed like another ten years at least, they landed on some flat surface with a loud thump. Hermes set her down and knelt on the roof of what appeared to be a large building.

"Where are we?" she asked, carefully inching towards the edge of the roof in an attempt to get a better look without falling into the abyss.

"Heaven's archives," he replied, rearing his arm back to thrust his elongated claws into the top of the roof. "Highest point in all of Heaven besides the Throne itself."

"But we just fell *down*."

"It's a matter of perspective, blah blah physics, quantum something or the other. I'd explain it, but we don't have time--and it's boring."

At least it was definitely Hermes. "Okay, but why are we here?"

He turned back to give her a dirty look. "Let's just say we're gonna need a little insurance policy of our own to get out of here in one piece."

Before she could respond, Hermes peeled open a section of the roof like the lid to a sardine can. “Wait here," he said, lowering himself through the hole.

"Like there's anywhere to go," Jordan called after him, hugging herself as she looked out into the vast expanse. The blackness alone seemed like enough to make a person go mad if they stared into it long enough, and Jordan knew her mental state was already on shaky ground after Purgatory, so she looked away. Moments turned into minutes and she began to grow worried that he wasn’t going to return at all. If Heaven's archives were important enough for Hermes to be interested in, they were important enough to have angelic guards. Even in his new and terrible form, Jordan wasn't sure if Hermes was a strong enough demon to face off against an angel.

In her mind, the chief difference between an angel and a demon was that a demon would kill you without a second thought while an angel would kill you without a first.

Just as Jordan was contemplating her odds if she went after him, Hermes finally appeared, carrying something that was roughly the size of Jordan's hand and wrapped in a shroud of linen. He tucked it away carefully inside his cloak. “Got it.”

"What is that?"

"Like I said," he replied, walking toward the distant edge of the building, "it's insurance against the angels for when we get home."

"How are we going to get back?" she asked, growing warier of the answer with each step he took closer to the edge.

"Remember when I told you this was the second-highest point in Heaven?"

"Yeah…"

"There's only one way down from Heaven if you don't have wings, and I kind of lost my flying privileges somewhere between the Ice Age and the Age of Jazz," he replied, hoisting her into his arms again.

"Hermes! You can't be serious. We'll die!"

"It's not the first time I fell from Heaven, and it probably won't be the last," he announced, gazing down at her with mischief and madness in his eyes. "Do you trust me, Jordan?"

She replied with an emphatic, "No."

Hermes laughed. "Good girl. Then you have learned something after all," he said, holding out his hand. "Stay here and let it all be for nothing, or take a leap of faith and come with me. The choice is yours. It always was."

Jordan might have laughed at that, if the chasm below had left room for anything other than terror. She could hear trumpets in the distance and the building they were standing on quaked with vibrations from what sounded like a whole army in pursuit. Something told her they were aware of the breech. She stared at Hermes' hand and reluctantly reached out, still not quite sure what her decision was going to be when her fingertips brushed his and an all too familiar spark passed between them.

No… It wasn't possible. Not him.

How many times had they touched? If Hermes was among her consorts, she would have known. Then again, touching Samael had been an entirely unique experience as well. Maybe things were more pronounced in the void.

She remembered the first time they'd kissed, the night of the full moon and the festival. The spark that had passed between them then. Looking back, she couldn't remember him ever touching her on the full moon since and back then, she hadn't understood what that spark meant…

One look in Hermes' eyes told her everything and she realized the truth behind another one of his infamous half-truths. "You knew," she whispered.

“I had a feeling,” he answered, his green eyes full of something she had never seen in them before. Something ancient and terrible and magical all at once. Something that chilled her to the bone and set her heart on fire. “What’s it going to be?”

Jordan swallowed her fear and took his hand. In that moment, she knew the greatest lie of all was that she’d ever had a choice. The two of them had been fated to cross paths long ago, and as Jordan dove with him into the abyss, her body pressed close to his and his arms wrapped around her to shield her from the fall, she came to accept that he was both her destiny and her curse. He was her savior and the one who’d damned her. She hated him, but she realized only as they were both falling toward earth at the speed of light that she also loved him, which was far more dangerous.

No, she had never had a choice. And yet, she chose him anyway.

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*TO BE CONTINUED.*

Thank you for reading! If you can spare a moment, please share your thoughts by leaving a review! Book 2 in the Harem of Babylon series is planned for release in early June, 2018!

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G.A. Rael is a nonbinary author of paranormal romance and urban fantasy who enjoys writing about love in all pairings. If you like shifters who meet their match in sassy, curvy heroines, unapologetic bad boys with a soft spot for the right woman, and destined mates who fight for their happily ever afters, join The Coven Facebook Group!

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